Grumpy
Christmas
MOUNTAIN MAN
ADULTS EROTIC SEX STORIES FOR WOMEN ROUGH TABOO AGE-GAP OLDER DADDY YOUNGER WOMAN SHORT NOVELS
IZZIE VEE

Grumpy Christmas Mountain Man: Adults Erotic Sex Stories for Women

Rough Taboo Age-Gap Older Daddy Younger Woman Short Novels

Steamy, Forced & Forbidden Romance

IZZIE VEE

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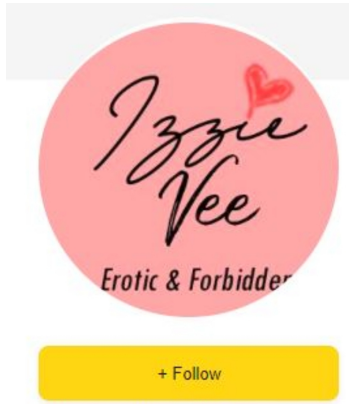

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Chapter 1

Victoria

I dodged a few people in my office corridor, trying to not to fall while rushing to my boss' office. It's a hard feat. Not only am I late; I'm juggling two cups of coffee, a paper bag containing breakfast, my laptop bag and a folder I just picked up from the lobby security. My hands are so full, there's no space for even a strand of my hair.

"Hey, watch out!"

I gasped, braking to a stop. Still, it wasn't enough to stop me from bumping into Oliver, the office heartthrob. His strong arms held me in place, preventing me from toppling over. By some miracle, the cups of coffee remained intact. The universe probably realized how much I needed this pick-me-upper.

"Sorry, Oliver," I mumbled. "It's one of those crazy mornings."

"Don't worry about it." He gave me the signature flirty wink that made the other journalists swoon, but it only amused me. Oliver was the perfect guy—physically at least—perfect height, hair, body—even his teeth were white and straight, always glistening when he smiled. For some reason, he didn't make my pulse trip whenever he came around. There was no man alive who ever did. "Just be careful, okay?" he continued. "I wouldn't want you to get hurt."

"Thanks for your concern, but I'll be fine."

He smiled again, his head jerking to the coffee in my hand. "Things are that bad, huh?"

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"I've never seen you with two cups of coffee. You must be extra stressed."

"Oh." I shook my head, holding up a cup. "This one's for Mr. Pearson."

"Okay, then it's really bad. You *never* buy Mr. Pearson coffee. What's up?"

I shrugged. "I don't know. He called me last night for an emergency meeting this morning. He didn't even tell me what it's about."

Oliver winced. "It doesn't sound too good, Vic."

I blew out a sigh. "You too? And here I was, hoping I'd been worrying

too much. You think he's about to fire me?"

"Nah." Oliver squeezed my shoulder reassuringly. "Mr. Pearson is a hard-ass, but I doubt he's heartless. You'll be fine."

"I hope so." My watch beeped with the hourly notification. It's nine o'clock. "Gotta go, Oliver. Talk to you later."

My armpits were already sweaty despite me just getting to work. The uneasiness in my gut told me this was not going to be a fun meeting. With a huff, I paused for a brief second at the large mahogany door and used my shoulder to push it open, almost tumbling over my feet when it flew forward much quicker than I expected. I straightened, meeting the hard gaze of the tall, handsome man standing behind the large mahogany desk.

"Good morning sir, I'm sorry I'm late," I explained, trying to catch my breath as I moved toward his desk and placed a cup of coffee before him. The folder that I had stuck under my arm slipped a little, and I quickly caught it with my free hand.

Mr. Pearson didn't reply, his hard stare remaining in place, which made me more nervous than before.

"Uh… the line at the café was a real bummer and my colleague —she usually works the morning shift—well, she called in sick today. It took me double the time—" I stopped, clearing my throat when I realized he couldn't care less why I was late. "You wanted to see me?" I asked, pulling at my top, that was probably smeared with my sweat.

With a sigh, Mr. Pearson eased back in his chair, his eyes still locked on me.

"Take a seat, Miss Danvers," he said, his tone firm, giving me a clue of his agenda for this meeting.

I took a seat and eyed my cup of coffee, desperately wanting to take a sip. After waking late that morning, I had no time to grab breakfast and just enough time – or lack thereof – to grab coffee. My stomach churned with queasiness, and I didn't know whether it came from my hunger or those pair of intense green eyes staring back at me.

With a great eye for fashion, I always dressed impeccably for work. People came to me for styling tips. Makeovers were my forte. But from the way Mr. Pearson stared me down, it made me double-check the snug pencil skirt and flattering chiffon top that presented the aura of professionalism. I didn't need a mirror to confirm how great I looked, so why did this meeting give me flashbacks of being called to the principal's office back in high school? I remembered it like yesterday, when I'd skipped school to sleep with Brian Matthews

– who turned out to be an absolute douchebag by the way. He took my virginity and gave me a heartbreak in return. It took me years to get over that dickhead.

However, this situation was more serious – my career could possibly be at stake. Correction: it was at stake. I could feel it in my gut.

"It's the middle of the month, Miss Danvers, and I'm yet to receive a draft of your story for the next issue. Care to explain why?" he asked, rocking side to side in his chair with his fingers entwined.

I reached for my folder right away, pretending that my expense report was the draft of a story in the works. The truth was, I had nothing the memory of a headline I saw online this morning. "Er, I was thinking about the Ponzi scheme involving our former mayor. The cops refuse to indict him for it, but all know he's the mastermind. I'd like to get to the bottom of it—"

I cut myself off when his mouth tightened, his eyes going dull. "That's something I'd expect Pete to write. An okay story, but nothing to get people to pick it up at first glance. There's no proof the mayor's involved, and even if he was, the story has been beaten more than a stubborn mule at this point."

"I understand what you're saying, Mr. Pearson, I can put a spin on it—"

Miss Danvers, you've been working here for a little over a year now and you came in like a thunderstorm, especially with that head-turning fracking story—the one we broke exclusively. Not to mention the piece you wrote on those kids who tried to cover up their friend's murder. Remember how that issue of your interview with that cult leader flew off the shelves? Have you forgotten the awards we'd gotten for your hard work? I'd expected to see the same drive, but you've been off your game for months now. Makes me wonder if you have nothing left to give," he said, and my stomach dropped. Glancing at my hands, I saw how white they were. I imagined my face was just as pale.

"Mr. Pearson, please. I've been trying my best to find a decent story. I er –"

"You need to try harder, Victoria. Your career depends on it. It's bad business for the company to keep paying your hefty salary with nothing in return. I'm giving you one last shot, and if the story isn't doesn't blow people out the park, I'm afraid I'll have to let you go," he said with a shrug and a derisive twist of his thin lips.

I sat transfixed in my chair, his words freezing me in place. I

suspected what this meeting would be about, but hearing Mr. Pearson say the words was too surreal and heart wrenching. Working at Grapevine Buzz was everything I'd ever dreamt of, and when I got hired right out of college, I felt like the luckiest person alive. But as I sat there wondering what his next words would be, it felt like a nightmare.

"You have a day to present your story. You may leave, Victoria," he said dismissively, reaching for his cup of coffee and taking a sip.

Having not a clue of what to do next, but knowing time was my enemy, I hurriedly closed the folder and grabbed my coffee before I exited the room. My heart rate was still on a high when I plopped in the chair in my cubicle with a view of the busy city. It was always inspiring seeing all the activities below; people going about their business, knowing each of them had a story the world needed to hear about.

I pulled down the blinds, covering the window, shutting out the distraction below. *I should focus. People-gazing won't save my job.*

Turning my laptop on, I scanned the internet, searching for something to trigger my next ground-breaking piece. After two hours, and with my brain falling asleep, I convinced myself this was my last day working for Grapevine Buzz.

When the clock struck five, I went home more defeated than I'd ever felt my entire life. It was a wasted day doing research and finding nothing inspiring enough to secure my job.

I drew for a bottle of wine after taking a shower, curling up on the couch to binge-watch my favorite reality series and unwind. I was halfway through the first episode when my roommate and best friend, Ashley, entered the front door.

She groaned when she saw me, her bag falling to the floor as she released it. I made way for her on the couch as she kicked off her comfortable, closed-toed shoes and flopped down beside me.

"What is it this time?" I asked, knowing she came home every night with a similar expression.

She turned to look at me, her hazel eyes a little droopy. "Tell me why I decided to become a nurse again?" she asked, genuinely curious for a response.

"Well, it's everything you've ever dreamt of since we were in high school," I replied, and she rolled her eyes. I grinned. Ashley loved to complain, even about the things she enjoyed. I often

wondered if she got a kick out of it or something.

"Well, it's not anymore. I regret using Grey's Anatomy as inspiration," she said with a scoff.

I pull her close, running my fingers through her thick, blonde hair. I remember her obsession with the hospital drama series back in high school. The cast made hospital procedures seem effortless, but Ashley discovered during her internship how far from the truth they were. Back then, it was too late to turn back.

"Things will get better, babe," I said.

"You think?" she asked.

"I know." I didn't feel as confident, but I hoped the words were enough to trigger positive energy in the room.

Ashley blew out a sigh and turned to the television, her brows furrowing when she saw what was on. "Seems like I'm not the only one who's stressed." This time she eased up and turned toward me, her eyes scanning my face as if trying to figure out the problem before I fessed up.

"Why do you think I'm stressed?" I challenged.

"Come on, you only watch this thrashy series when you're stressed out. What is it? Come, on tell me."

I raked my fingers through my hair, releasing a resigned sigh. "I'm about to lose my job, Ash."

Ashley's brows shot up. "The hell? What do you mean?"

"I haven't submitted a decent story in ages. Pearson is giving me one chance time to produce another hit or I'm out. His words. I don't know what I'm going to do because I can't think of anything!" I moaned, smashing a small cushion in my face.

"Wh– are you sure he said that?"

"Yes. I have a day to present a draft and a week for a full story. I feel like I'm stuck, Ash."

Ashley removed the cushion from my face and shook my shoulders. "It's not the end, Vicky. You just need to dig deep for something spectacular. You always do; maybe you're overthinking it."

I shook my head. "I'm not, Ash. I've been stuck for a while, struggling to find the spark I had when I just started my job."

"Your brain is probably overworked. It's been a year since your last break, remember? You need some time off, Vicky," Ashley suggested.

“Nah, I can’t afford a break. I’ll have to come up with a story, regardless of how tired I am.” I sighed. “I don’t want to lose my job, Ash.”

She immediately reached for my hand and gave it a gentle squeeze. “That’s not going to happen. You’re good at what you do. Sleep on it. I’m certain something will come.”

I didn’t feel Ashley’s confidence, but I smiled anyway.

“I’m going to take a shower, then maybe we can go over some topics for your story. Do some research, maybe?” she suggested.

“Ash, you must be tired. Don’t worry about it; I’ll figure this out,” I said, not knowing how true it was, but wanting to reassure my best friend.

She shot me down with a wave of her hand. “I’m not that tired. Plus, I’ll be working the night shift tomorrow, which gives me plenty time to sleep in,” she said before patting my legs and bounding from the couch. “I’ll be right back,” she said before dashing to her bedroom.

I smiled, more thankful than ever for a friend like Ashley who’d been there for me through thick and thin. It was a mutual dependency from the day she moved across the street from me and knocked on the door with her mom who introduced them as our new neighbors. We remained close throughout high school and college. Now, we were almost joined at the hip.

With a sigh, I reached for the remote and shut the TV off, deciding to reach for my laptop instead, since I really had to research my next story if I planned on keeping my job.

Half an hour later, Ashley raced from her room with an expression like she’d just won a million bucks. Her hazel eyes were wide with pleasure and her smile competed with the lighting in the room as she approached me with her phone in hand.

“I don’t know how I didn’t think of this sooner!” she exclaimed, throwing the phone at me.

I quickly caught it and gazed on the screen. It was a video of a woman discussing a book she’d read—one that totally awed her, based on her review.

I glanced up at Ashley. “What’s this about?”

“Griffin Holt – the author. He’s all everyone’s talking about on social media.” She frowned at me. “Have you been living under a rock?”

“Of course, I’m not, but–”

“Shh, so apparently, this famous blogger, Christine James, read a mystery thriller written by Griffin and it’s been blowing up the place ever since. Everyone’s reading it – which reminds me, I need to get a copy, but anyway, it’s the new hot topic on Booktok and people have been giving reviews and all that stuff and it’s just epic. I don’t know why I didn’t tell you sooner. It’s everywhere.”

I shook my head to process the information coming at me. “Ok, but I still don’t understand what this has to do with my story, Ash.”

She rolled her eyes and scoffed. “You can be so dense sometimes. Griffin Holt basically vanished off the face of the earth after writing this best-selling story years ago. No one has heard from him since and that’s pretty suspicious, especially after creating a story like Hangman. One would think he’d kept writing, especially after how it blew up back then. But there’s been nothing. No sighting of him, no new book coming out. Now, seven years later, the book’s blowing up again. People are speculating this may pull him out of hiding. You need to get the story on him.”

“What story?”

She stared at me like I had no brains. “The story of why he vanished. Can you please keep up?”

“Ok, but if he vanished off the face of the earth, how am I supposed to find him?”

“Well, you need to figure that out, but listen to me, social media is at its prime and he’s trending now – it’s a wonder how you hadn’t heard about this before now – you need to find him and get the tea. Imagine how your career would skyrocket. Pearson would be begging for you to stay,” she said with big, bright eyes.

I bit my lips. “How do you even know this story will take off? It might not be enough for Pearson to give me a second chance. Plus, for all we know, this man is just not digging the spotlight anymore.”

“Oh. I forgot to mention. Him going viral isn’t only connected to *his* disappearance, Vicky.”

“Huh?”

“There are rumors going around about his personal life. He had a wife and a baby on the way when he went off the grid. No one has seen or heard from them, either. People are saying he might be holding both wife and child prisoner wherever he is.”

I rolled my eyes. “Come on…”

“Or worse.”

Again, I rolled my eyes.

"Believe me; no one has found his family. It's like they've also vanished. Something's fishy here, Vicky, and if you can figure out what it is, Pearson will be kissing your feet for months to come."

I scratched my head and glanced back at the paused video, which had over ten million likes. I tapped on the comments and scrolled through the list, with majority of them asking what happened to Griffin Holt. Some were even saying he'd made the book a reality, massacred his family, and was hiding out somewhere. A chill ran down my spine and I turned my gaze to Ashley who seemed edgy for my response.

"I'm telling you, Vicky. Even celebrities are on this. I say it's worth the shot. Bring the idea to Pearson and see if he approves it, then you find Mystery Man and get him to tell his story."

"And what if he doesn't want to?"

She thought on it for a second. "I doubt that. I mean, who can resist your pretty face?" she teased with a cheesy grin.

I snorted. "Ash, the man's married with a kid," I emphasized.

"Still a man, regardless." She shrugged, smirking.

"You're terrible, you know that?" I said, a little amused. Ashley had a warped moral compass, especially with men and relationships.

She grinned. "Oh, whatever. You love me anyway."

I smiled. "I do. This may be a long shot, but it's definitely more than what I have, so thank you, Ash. I honestly don't know what I'd do without you."

"I ask myself the same thing every day."

I laughed and shoved her playfully.

Jokes aside, I had an uphill battle ahead, one that made me. Desperation made me push the doubt aside. Whatever it took, I had to find Griffin Holt. Deep down, I knew this was the break I needed.

Chapter 2

Victoria

That night I stayed up late, trying to learn everything about Griffin Holt. Ashley was right; he'd gone viral. Social media, Google, even a morning show on cable mentioned him. Millions of people had seen the original video that went viral and thousands had shared, acquiring numerous views as well. His books were now bestsellers and the most popular one had blown up with sales. It made me curious to read and see what the hype was all about. Besides, if I was going to interview the man, I had to get inside his head—at least, a little. So, I ordered his most popular book, *Hang man.*

After placing the order, I scoured the internet for more information on him. There were no recent photos, of course, but I spent a few minutes more than necessary gazing on the ones I saw online. For someone who wrote murder mysteries, I didn't expect a cheery-faced man wearing glasses. He was exceptionally tall, not muscular, but athletic-looking and handsome in a boyish way despite being about thirty years old in that last photograph.

I grew more engrossed in my search, learning about his pregnant wife. She was a nurse who had just taken maternity leave around the time she disappeared. Like Griffin, no one had heard from her, which left me even more intrigued. Where was Rachel Holt? What about their baby? Were they alive?

Ashley was right. This story might be a good shot to secure my job and prove to Pearson that I still had the touch. All I had to do was find the source.

That night I stayed up late, reading between the lines of Holt's very private life and wondering if there was something that hinted at his hideout. But there was nothing apart from information that the couple lived in LA for a while and went MIA before the birth of their baby girl.

I found nothing else, but I didn't make room for discouragement. A good journalist always kept good sources. Tomorrow, I hoped they would lead me to my mystery man. For the rest of the night, I packed my brain with as much info as I could while mentally preparing myself for Pearson. I only hoped that after showing him the evidence, he would approve.

It was a solid plan, but not enough to help me sleep that night. Not when the following day held my fate.

**

I rose early the following morning and hurried through a shower, determined not to be late. Ashley lay sprawled out on the living room couch because she always took advantage of her mornings off by watching her favorite TV shows until two in the morning.

I tried my very best to be quiet, knowing she needed the rest, but as I dashed past her on my way to the kitchen, my shin caught the coffee table. A screech rang out. I quickly slapped my hand over my mouth, hopping around on one leg, but it was too late. Ashley was a light sleeper, and my commotion had already woken her up.

"What's going on?" she asked groggily while rubbing the sleep from her eyes.

"Shit! Sorry Ash… I didn't mean to wake you."

She fanned at me playfully as she sat up on the couch, her eyes half open as she directed her gaze at me. "Don't sweat; I was getting up anyway. I'm starving." She yawned with an elaborate stretch. "What's for breakfast?"

"No time. I don't wanna be late today. I'm meeting Pearson again," I said as I moved to the kitchen and poured a cup of coffee. A bagel had been left in the toaster from the day before. I pulled it out, giving it a sniff. Not the freshest, but it was enough.

"Oh yeah! Let me know how it goes! I'm certain I'll still be here at the time."

I reached for my bag with the bagel trapped between my teeth and the cup of coffee in hand.

"Wish me luck," I mumbled as I swung my bag over my shoulder and took a bite of the bread.

"Always! Good luck!" she called just as I closed the door.

I ran down the stairs of my apartment and hopped in the mini-cooper my mom bought for my eighteenth birthday, a few weeks before she took ill. I cruised to the office downtown, smiling when I realized I didn't have to break my neck to get there because of how early I was. I took my time, blowing out a breath, thankful my sweat glands weren't overactive this morning. This was a positive sign that day would go well.

After settling at my desk, I powered up my laptop and rehearsed my winning pitch for Pearson. Around me, my colleagues appeared busy, the sound of clicking keyboards filling the room. I couldn't suppress my envy, wishing my month had gone well, too. With a deep

sigh, I shook it off. There were still two weeks left in the month. I had time to make an impact.

"Hey Vic, Pearson wants to see you in his office," Oliver said as he passed with a stack of files.

My heart suddenly did a sudden somersault. Although I expected our meeting, it didn't make Oliver's words less nerve-racking. I took a gulp of my warm coffee and cleared my throat, lifting my phone as I stood. There was no sense writing a report when I had all the information on my phone.

I tucked a few loose strands of hair behind my ear and moved towards Pearson's office. The door was left open and as I entered, Pearson's head lifted, his eyes doing a slow-motion scan of my body. My tailored pants are a little fitted and my top was made of a sheer material, but my outfit was still modest. Still, it didn't ease my discomfort and made me wish for a large sheet to cover myself. I summoned a smile, closing the door.

"Good morning, sir."

"Victoria. For once, you aren't late. Good," he quipped.

My cheeks burned a little, but I didn't reply as I sat before him with my hands in my lap.

"I assumed you have a pitch for me. Right?" he asked.

I cleared my throat and straightened my posture. "I er—yes, Griffin Holt."

"Who?" he asked, thick brows drawn together.

"Griffin Holt — author of the Hangman and a few other popular books," I informed.

"Ok… and what does Griffin Holt have to do with your story?"

I picked up my phone and selected the folder containing all the information I gathered on Holt. "He's an internet sensation right now. The world wants to know where he is and what he's been up to," I said.

Pearson took my phone, glanced at it for a few seconds, then tossed it on the desk.

"BookTok is going crazy over him," I added.

His brows furrowed. "BookTok?"

"Yes, it's the side of TikTok that focuses entirely on books."

"Danvers, this isn't reader's digest. No one wants to know about

an author," he said, his tone flat.

I swallowed. "That's not true. There's a mystery surrounding his disappearance; rumors that have piqued people's curiosity even more — just take a look please."

I handed him the phone again, suppressing my relief when he skipped through the contents of my folder. He paused on a video, his forehead creasing as he listened to the commentary about the author.

"Read the comments," I prodded.

He tapped the screen and scrolled through the list of comments, his expression growing more intrigued as he read.

Optimism filled me. "I'm sure no one has contacted him –"

"And you can?" he asked, a brow raised.

"I can," I said firmly, hoping he read my smile for the confidence I didn't feel. "Wherever he is, I can find him and get a story."

He stared at me, his gaze never leaving mine as if he wanted to find the credibility in my words. My posture remained straight as he sized me up. Pearson knew he was intimidating and mostly used it to his advantage. Today, I was determined to not let him get to me.

"Okay," he finally said. "I'm giving you a few days to get your story. If this falls through, you're out, got it?" He returned my phone and I took it with a nod, surprised when he didn't let go.

"You should be lucky I like you, Danvers. Otherwise, you'd be out of here a long time ago," he said before he finally released the device.

A chill ran down my spine. His words weren't professional. I hadn't been laid in ages, but I knew when a man was coming on to me. The unmistakable lust in his eyes made my stomach clench. Pearson was an attractive guy, but his douchebag attitude was such a turnoff. I wasn't that desperate for a man in my life. I hoped he wouldn't try to make a move. The last thing I wanted was another interference with my job.

Maybe I'm overthinking it. I've been out of the game for two years, anyway.

Two years ago, broke up with a Jeremy, a guy I'd been seeing for a few months when I realized he only dated me for money and an occasional place to stay when he had issues with his roommate. Since then, I'd been celibate, focusing on work.

“Are you still here, Danvers?” Pearson asked, doing that slow-motion scan of my body again. “Is there something else you needed?”

With a quick headshake, I hurried from his office, still feeling his gaze on me as I left, relieved when I finally reached my desk and in my chair – away from his prying eyes.

I didn’t waste time relaxing. Not when my ass was now on the clock. Lifting my phone, I quickly dialed a number and waited patiently for an answer. It came after the first ring.

“Heyo, my sweet Vicky,” the deep, smooth voice greeted.

I couldn’t help my smile. “Is that how you greet someone you haven’t heard from in ages?”

James, affectionately known as Jimmy, my friend from college choked a laugh. “And whose fault is that? I’m sure if you check your inbox, there’s a ton of unanswered messages from me.”

I bit my lips and cringed, knowing that to be true. “Er– I’ve been crazy busy, Jimmy. I’m sorry.”

“Yeah, yeah. That’s always your excuse isn’t it? I won’t hold it against you, though.” He chuckled. “What can I help you with, sweetheart?”

I felt horrible asking a favor after I ignored his messages, but Jimmy had gotten the gist from college after I’d made it clear countless times. We couldn’t be anything more than friends.

“I er– I need you to find someone for me.”

“Who’s that?”

“Griffin Holt,” I said softly, sliding down in my seat.

“Griffin Holt,” he muttered, as if the name meant something to him. “You mean that author dude everyone’s been talkin’ bout?”

My eyes widened. “You’ve seen it too!”

“Yeah, I can barely scroll on my TikTok without seeing some mention of the guy. I see him more than my family!” He laughed and I joined in.

“Yeah well, I want to run a story on him, but I need to find him first.”

“That’s gonna be tough, Vic. He’s been MIA, or did you miss that part?”

“Yeah, but I trust your skills.” Jimmy was the best tracker I knew. He got hired for an internship by a well-known security firm

before we even graduated. Within a year, he'd gotten a permanent job as a cyber security engineer. "You've always helped me out of some tight spaces."

"Imagine that, yet I still can't get you to have dinner with me," he teased.

I rubbed my neck, a flood of guilt washing over me. Jimmy had saved my ass more than often than I could count, especially after I got hired at the magazine. Yet, he asked for nothing return—at least not much. "Ok fine. If and when we find this guy, I'll have dinner with you," I replied.

"Well damn, I'll say that's a deal I can't refuse." He chuckled. "I'll find you your mystery man, boo."

I grinned at his term of endearment. "Thanks Jimmy."

"I'll have something for you before the end of the day, I promise."

"Thank you."

The clicking of a keyboard sounded in my ear, telling me the search had already begun. "Don't mention it, beauty."

I smiled as I ended the call, suppressing the urge to squeal. Things were finally looking up. I had no doubt Jimmy's skills would lead me straight to Griffin. Which meant preparing for dinner with Jimmy. It wasn't a big deal. I could handle a date with a guy who only wanted to get under my skirt.

Jimmy was an amazing tracker but a terrible boyfriend. Scratch that. He wasn't boyfriend material at all. Back in college, I lost count of how often I saw him with a new girl on his arm, or the fights that broke out over him, or the lies he told to get a one-night stand off his back. I hated how he played women like puppets, but his response was, "Everyone knows I'm a dog, Vic. Just don't put me on a leash. I hate that shit."

There were no safe women on campus. Not even me, who knew where all the bodies were buried. It didn't surprise me when he tried making a move right before we graduated. He didn't get offended when I told him no, and he didn't back off, either. Two years later and he was still shooting his shot. Bless him, but he would never get that chance.

I didn't plan on being celibate much longer, but I wanted my next lover to be my last. Someone who made my heart dance when he walked into the room. Someone who made my body tingle like the heroines in the romance novels I read. A man with eyes only for me.

Ashley swore that person didn't exist, but deep down, I knew she was wrong. Mr. Right was out there waiting for me. All I had to do was search for him.

Which I planned to. Right after I broke the biggest story of my career.

Chapter 3

Victoria

The day went by smoothly until Jimmy called me back an hour before I left work. I snatched the phone off my desk and brought it to my ear, excited for the call.

"Hey, what do you have for me?"

Jimmy sighed; a terrible sign. "Nothing, I'm afraid. The guy's a ghost, Vic."

My shoulders slumped. The smile quickly faded. "Nothing? Are you sure?"

"Not a single trace. And trust me, babe, I searched."

I bit my lip, dragging my fingers through my hair. "Fuck." If Jimmy hit a wall, it meant there was no hope. I envisioned Pearson slapping a 'you're fired' letter on my desk.

"Listen, this still ain't over. I want that date, so I'm gonna make sure I find him. Alright?" he said.

I smiled, somehow reassured by Jimmy's words and the confidence in his tone. "Thanks, Jimmy."

"Don't give up on me now, baby girl; I'm gonna come through for you."

After a brief conversation afterwards, I hung up, the doubts returning the second I put the phone down. Jimmy never once had a problem locating his target. Would this be his epic fail?

I dragged myself through the rest of the day, my eyes darting to the clock continuously. There was no story without knowing where Griffin Holt was and no story meant no job. Defeated, I left work that evening, hoping Jimmy would call with a breakthrough, but as the time passed, I realized it was wishful thinking. As I stepped into my apartment lobby, my phone rang. Hoping it was Jimmy, I quickly dug into my bag and pulled it out. My heart sank when I saw Ashley's name on the screen.

"Hey," I mumbled as I climbed the stairs.

"Is everything okay? You don't sound as excited as I'd hoped," she said.

"I'm at a dead end, Ash. No word on Holt. I don't know what I'm going to do." I sighed, shoving the key into the lock of my

apartment.

"Did you call Jimmy?"

"Yes, I did. He can't find him, either."

"Oh, dang."

"Yup. My sentiments exactly."

"Listen, we're not giving up. I'm sure Jimmy will find him; he always does."

"I hope so…"

"Have a little faith, will you? I've got to head back inside but chin up. It will work out. I'll see you when I get home, okay?"

"Okay, see you then," I said before disconnecting the call.

I stepped inside, dropped my bag and made a beeline for my bed, exhausting washing over me. I stared at the blank ceiling and wondering of karma was out to get me for something terrible my ancestors did.

Despite being tired, sleep did not come. I waited up until midnight, hoping to get Jimmy's call, but nothing came except for the awareness that my job didn't exist anymore. I couldn't go back to Pearson and tell him I didn't find Griffin Holt. Not after being so confident and convincing in our meeting yesterday. He'd definitely fire me on the spot.

"Don't worry bout things that are beyond your control," my mom would always say when I got flustered. With those words in my head, I pulled the covers over me, mentally preparing for the day ahead. I did everything in my power to find Griffin. If this was the end of my tenure at Grapevine Buzz, then so be it. My resume needed a little update, but there shouldn't be much problem finding a new job. The salary won't be as attractive, considering my current employers were the best around, but it beat being unemployed.

I woke up the following morning and dragged myself to the bathroom where I took a shower and got dressed for work. My phone rang and I ignored it at first, assuming it was Ashley telling me she had picked up a double shift. That was the case sometimes.

The phone continued to ring as I dried my body with the towel. My heart lifted when I saw Jimmy's smiling face on the screen. My fingers scraped against the bedside table as I grabbed up the phone and slammed it against my ear, excitement bubbling in my chest.

"Hey!" I answered.

He chuckled. “What did I tell ya?”

I held back a squeal as I gripped the phone tighter. “You found him?”

“Well not exactly,” he began and my stomach dropped.

“But I found his sister. She lives in Beverly Hills… I’ll send you the address. I dunno, maybe you could get her to tell you where her bro is holed up.”

I rubbed the back of my neck and mustered a sigh. “I guess that’s something, but I doubt she’ll tell a stranger where her brother is.”

“Worth a shot, isn’t it?”

“Yeah… thanks Jimmy; I’ll let you know how this plays out,” I said.

“Please do. Alright, we’ll chat. Good luck with this one.”

“Thanks,” I said before I hung up the phone and mustered yet another sigh.

Although my spirits had improved a little, I wasn’t a hundred percent confident I’d get the information I needed. If Griffin’s sister was as secretive as him, then I was doomed, but I kept my fingers crossed.

After Jimmy sent me Kourtney Holt’s address, I sent Pearson a text with my agenda for the day. Five minutes later, I gathered my things headed out. Beverly Hills was just fifteen minutes away. With the GPS in my car and the information Jimmy had given me, I parked in her driveway in no time.

I got out and walked toward the door of the two-story house, glancing down at my attire before I knocked. A few minutes later, a tall, slender woman opened up. She looked striking, her thick hair a beautiful blanket of rainbow colors, the silky length flowing to her waist. Multiple piercings decorated her eyebrows, nose and ears. Her eccentric appearance clashed with Griffin’s indistinctive look, but she was no doubt his sister. The resemblance was clear as day.

Her grey eyes narrowed at me as she frowned. “May I help you?” she asked, leaning against the door and folding her arms.

“Hi, I’m Victoria Danvers. I’m a writer from Grapevine Buzz. I was hoping to talk with you, if you don’t mind,” I replied, stretching out my hand.

Kourtney glanced down at my outstretched hand, her expression

growing more confused. “What’s this about?” she asked before taking my hand for a gentle shake.

“I was hoping we could talk about your brother, Griffin Holt,” I replied, bracing for her response.

She swallowed, her chest bouncing with a harsh sigh. For a moment, I expected her to slam the door in my face, but she stepped aside and allowed me to enter. My eyes scanned the high-ceilinged foyer and the beautiful artwork against the wall. At her gesture, I followed her to the living room that was designed as colorful as she was.

“Would you like something to drink?” she asked after I sat in the plush, single-seated sofa.

I shook my head, giving her a gentle smile. “No, thank you.”

“Okay… so, what is this about? Why are you asking about Griffin?”

“Er– I’m sure you’ve seen that your brother has gone viral recently,” I began.

She nodded with a scoff. “Yeah, it’s not easy seeing strangers accusing him of a crime he didn’t commit,” she said bitterly. “I wish they would just stop already.”

“Well that’s why I’m here. I was hoping to set the record straight… have a talk with him, maybe?”

She shook her head. “Griffin doesn’t live here.”

“I know, but that’s the thing. I’ve been searching all over for him with no luck. Is it possible that you—”

“No.” Her eyebrows drew closer as she scowled. “Griffin decided to go off the grid and he wants it to remain that way.”

“Ms. Holt—”

“Listen, Griffin is a very private person and I’m sure he wouldn’t want to be disturbed. I haven’t even heard from him in a while, anyway.”

I pulled in a breath and breathed out slowly, clasping my hands and resting them on my knees. “Please… I won’t visit him with a crew or anything like that. It’ll just be me. I just want to ask him a few questions and that’s it, I promise.”

“I just told you, Ms. Danvers. He doesn’t want to be disturbed. I can’t tell you where he is; surely you understand that.”

“I do, but my career is on the line. If I don’t produce an eye

catching story, I'll be fired… please," I begged, locking my gaze with hers.

She shuffled in her chair and shook her head. "Griffin has always made it explicitly clear I shouldn't disclose his whereabouts unless there's an emergency—"

"I really need this, Ms. Holt. I promise to be out of his hair in no time and if he asks, I'll tell him I found him through another source. Please…" The desperation in my voice was a thick as hard dough bread, but I had no shame. I needed this story. If it required groveling, then so be it.

Kourtney bit her lips and lowered her gaze to her lap as she twiddled her fingers. My breath paused as I awaited a reply.

After what seemed like hours, she huffed a deep sigh. "Ok, sure, but if I tell you, you can't reveal it to anyone else, please. Griffin has grown to be a tough cookie, but he still has feelings. I don't want him to get hurt any more than he's been."

I nodded while wondering what her last line meant. "I promise, I'll keep the information safe."

She sighed, moving to a cabinet on the other side of the room. "The world needs to hear his story," she said. "I hope he gives it to you." I hear a drawer open, then she returned with a small notepad and a pen. There, she scribbled his address and tore the paper from the pad before handing it to me.

"Thank you." My eyes dropped to the paper, a tiny gasp leaving my mouth when I read the address. "Alaska?" My gaze shot to hers.

She shrugged. "How bad do you want that story, Ms. Danvers?"

**

Just my freaking luck! Of all the places Griffin Holt could have been hiding, he had to choose the coldest state. It was November. Alaska was probably shitting snow by now.

Damn it! Why do I keep taking two steps backward?

Disappointment followed me back to my apartment. I slammed the door shut, glancing at the time and wishing Ashley was home. I sorely needed someone to help me hash out this dilemma. Ashley was always my go-to when I faced problems like these.

Maybe I could call when she took her break. While I waited, I considered on my options. If I took time off from the office, I could

book a flight to Anchorage, then find a cheap hotel for a week's stay, at least. One week. That was all the time I needed. Ashley was right. I had the skills required to get the information that would save my job.

But what if Griffin was an anomaly? If I couldn't crack his armor, what would I do next? Based on Kourtney's response, it seemed there was an uphill climb ahead. Griffin's past interviews were lighthearted and fun, but considering he'd moved across states and disappeared from the real world, I didn't even expect a smile.

'The world needs to hear his story', Kourtney had said. There was a great story there. I had no doubt. Come hell or high water, I would get to the bottom of it.

The conviction was enough to spur me into action. Pearson had said he would give me a few days to get the story, but I didn't need to be in the office to get it done. Kourtney Holt begged me to keep her brother's whereabouts private, so I couldn't disclose it to my boss. I sent a request for time off to HR, hoping it would suffice. Next, I pulled out a small suitcase, packed enough warm clothes for two days, then rehearsed my introductory speech for the elusive Griffin Holt.

***

Ashley came home at nine, looking as drained as she always did after completing a twenty-four-hour shift. She stopped by my bedroom, plopping down on the bed with a groan.

I smiled at her predictable behavior and reached for her shoulder, giving it a reassuring rub. She turned on her side sighed at me, then her eyes narrowed as she spotted the suitcase on the far end of the bed.

"Wh– what's happening? Where are you going?" she asked.

"I found out where Holt is, Ash. I'm going for that interview," I replied, unable to suppress my grin.

Her expression brightened. "Yes! Didn't I tell you Jimmy would come through?"

"Yeah, you did. Turned out you had more faith than I did."

"Which means you need to trust what I say when I say it." She pokes my side, then her smile slowly faded. "Wait a minute. Where exactly is he?"

"Alaska—Anchorage to be exact," I said casually, watching as her eyes widened.

"What? That's miles away!" she exclaimed, sitting up.

“I know, but I have to do this, Ash.”

“Do you really? This is Alaska we’re talking about, Vicky. A-las-ka,” she slowly enunciated, staring like I’m a three-year-old learning the alphabet. “Have you considered this is biting off more than you can chew?”

My forehead creased. “Why do you say that?”

“He moved far away for a reason, Vic. It’s obvious he truly wants privacy. What if he’s a raging psychopath?” she asked, her expression tight with concern.

“I’ll take that risk. My job depends on it.” I shrugged nonchalantly, but the thought of Griffin hacking me to death makes me want to shit my pants.

“This just seems so wild to me. I don’t know Vic… are you sure about this?”

I push up on my knees, giving her a direct stare. “Ash, you put me on to this guy. You made me invest in his story. I can’t stop now, not when I’m on to something.”

She pulled in a breath. “I don’t want either of us to regret this.”

“We won’t; I promise. At the end of my trip, I’ll have a story that will put my name on everyone’s lips again. Mark my words.” I winked at her, but Ashley didn’t seem too convinced.

But that was my best friend. Always getting excited over things and then being fearful of the outcome later.

Chapter 4

Victoria

“But I don’t want you to go,” Ashley whined, tugging at the handle of my carryon. “I don’t want to stay here by my lonesome.”

I pulled the handle from her grasp, pushing the carryon in front of me. “I’ll be back before you know it. Besides, you’ll be too busy to miss me.”

“You’re right.” She wiped her eyes, nodding. “Work will be a bitch.”

“And Damon will be a perfect booty call,” I added with a grin.

She gasped which made me laugh out loud. “Busted! I heard you on the phone last night, Ash. I know of your little plan to keep ‘busy’ while I’m gone.”

“Oh, my God.” Ashley palmed her face. “I’m so ashamed.”

“That you’re still sleeping with your ex?” I removed her hands from her face. “No judgement Ash. If it makes you happy, then do it. I’ll feel less guilty about leaving you here, too.”

“It’s just sex. We’re not getting back together or anything,” she clarified, looking guilty. I was there when he broke her heart last year. When she vowed it was over between them.

“I said no judgement, remember?”

She smiled. “No judgement.”

“Now, help me get these bags to the car.”

The nerves settled in when Ashley dropped me at airport, and they grew worse during the five-hour flight to Anchorage. If this interview didn’t pan out, not only would I lose my job, I would have wasted twelve hundred dollars in flight and hotel fees.

A blast of chill hit my face as I left the terminal, prompting me to double wrap the scarf around my neck. Lucky for me, I’d taken Ashley’s advice and booked a taxi service. It was already waiting for me by the curb, identified by the driver holding a sign with my name. With no hesitation, I slid in as the driver opened the door, sighing when warmth welcomed me.

“Welcome to Alaska ma’am; where to?” the driver asked.

I gave him the address to the hotel and reclined on the leather seat, taking in the view outside. It’s already dark, so there wasn’t much to see except the white blanket of snow covering the town.

Having lived in LA all my life, I fell in love with the sight.

"First time here?" The cab drive asked me, his eyes meeting mine through the rear-view mirror.

"Yeah," I croaked, clearing my throat.

"Business or pleasure?"

"Business," I was quick to say.

He smiled. "Let's hope you wrap up business in time to have a little pleasure before you go. You can't visit Anchorage this time of year without fat tire biking or downslope skiing. Oh, and don't forget to view the aurora lights."

I nodded. "I'll keep those in mind." *As if I'd have the time.*

Pity.

I wished it wasn't so late. The urge to hit the ground running was even greater than checking into the hotel. What if I found Griffin tonight? I could use the rest of my trip to enjoy the town. It was the perfect time for a well-deserved break.

Perking up, I touched the cab driver's shoulder. "How far does your service go?"

He twisted his head to glance at me. "As far as you want, as long as you have the cash," he replied.

I hastily dug through my purse, searching for the piece of paper Kourtney Holt had given me. When I finally found it, I handed it to him. "Could you get me to that address?"

He glanced at the paper then back on the road. "Tonight?" he asked.

"Um… yeah, tonight."

"Lady, this is way up in the mountains. Are you sure you want to go there?"

"Yes, I'm sure. Is there a problem?"

He shrugged. "There are a few Airbnb cabins up there, but nothing that suits a city girl like you. You'd get bored with nothing to do, trust me."

"You mentioned Airbnb cabins. Are they occupied?"

"Usually in the summer. Most visitors keep to the town this time of the year. Snowstorms can keep you snowed in for days up there." He flicked the paper. "This cabin is the only one in use all year around."

"What do you know about whoever lives there?"

"Not much, except that it's some guy. At least, that's what I heard. Never seen him. He's a mystery, they say."

My heart flipped and I resisted the urge to pump my first in the air. Kourtney didn't send me on a wild goose chase after all. "About the other Airbnb's; how do I book my stay?"

A wild thought crossed my mind; what if I canceled my hotel booking and switched to an Airbnb in the mountains instead? I'd have closer access to Griffin, thus being able to work on my story much quicker than I planned. The faster I got the information, the sooner I could take my break.

The driver shrugged. "For most of them, you'd need to book in advance. There's only one where the owner comes in for the winter. If you show up with cash, he'll take you in."

"Sounds awesome. Can you take me there?"

"Well I could, but keep in mind, with the constant snow fall these past couple of days, I don't know far I'll get," he admitted.

I bit my lips. "Could you try?"

He nodded, taking a U-turn, the city lights zipping by as he pressed gas. Soon, we turned on a narrow road and began an incline. Pitch-black on each side, an occasional beam of light that signaled some sign of life, we traveled through the city until I was seeing mostly trees with only a few houses in sight. A few snowflakes started to cloud the windows of the car and I shifted in my seat as I grew anxious. I was never a fan of the cold, but I was this far already; I couldn't turn back. For what seemed like hours later, we started to climb up a mountain with just a path to indicate that this was a road. I could see a mist forming at the very top and trepidation started to fill me as I anticipated the end of the journey.

The car suddenly slowed, the tires screeching. I grip the back of the passenger seat as the engine stuttered. My eyes flashed to the driver, blood draining from my face as fear crept up my spine.

"What just happened?" I asked.

"It's as I feared. My car isn't fit to make the journey," he said, now turning to look at me, his expression concerned. "We need to turn back."

I shook my head even before he finished. "I can't do that. I need to talk to him," I said.

"Who?"

“The mystery guy you mentioned earlier,” I replied.

The driver scoffed. “Is that why you’re making this crazy trip? He’ll be there tomorrow. Come on. Let me take you to the hotel.” He turned the key and the engine gunned to life.

It was foolish of me to not listen to reason, but I was being led by an instinct stronger than my commonsense. “No. I want to see him now.”

“Jesus, lady. You’re more stubborn than my goddamn wife. Well, you can trudge through three-inch snow and risk getting hyperthermia, or you can take my advice – a guy who’s lived here all his life. You probably won’t make it to that cabin in this weather.”

“I’ll take my chances.” I pushed the door open, refusing to listen to another word from him, pulling out my suitcase with me. “This is very important to me. If I freeze to death, at least I tried.” I handed him my fare and swung my handbag over my shoulder, pulling the luggage behind me.

“You’re one persistent young lady!” he called after me. “Have it your way. Don’t say I didn’t warn you!”

A gust of wind swirled around me as the driver reversed down the hill, leaving with the only source of light. I got out my phone and turned the flashlight on, seeing nothing but snow-covered trees. Not ready to regret my decision, I pulled my suitcase—a challenging feat — trying my best to trudge through the snow. The longer I walked, the harder my movement.

It was as if a sky-dam had burst, dumping heavy snowfall on my shoulders. I shrieked as the icy droplets soaked my face, numbing it. What was a gentle, whistling breeze mere minutes ago, now turned into a howling, angry wind.

“Holy shit,” I muttered. “What the hell was I thinking?”

I wanted to stop and rest, but if I slowed down, I could be buried in snow in no time. Plus, moving helped to ward off the cold.

Until it didn’t.

Numbness traveled downwards, shutting me down. My parched throat stopped me from calling for help. Not that it would have made a difference. There was no sign of life for miles around.

Dragging myself to the side of the road. I dropped the suitcase beside a tree and sat on it, pulling my knees to my chest as I rubbed my gloved hands together. I looked to the fading road and couldn’t see much. I’d expected to have seen a house by now, but there was

nothing but trees. Where the hell was Griffin Holt?

I blew out a breath and a cloud of mist left my dry lips. Stupid me; I should have listened to that cab driver. As always, I figured I could do this on my own like everything I'd done in my life.

The snowstorm got heavier. My eyes drooped, and I slapped my cheeks. There was no way I could remain sitting there. If hypothermia set in, I'd be done for. I pressed my palm against the tree trunk, using it as leverage, but it wasn't enough to get me on my feet. My knees wobbled before giving way and I land on my ass again.

I throw my head against the tree trunk with a defeated groan, which soon gave way to tears. My body shivered as I cried, resigning myself to dying right there, covered in ice. Would anyone find me? Or would my story end right there in the wilderness?

My eyelids grew heavy again, and this time, I didn't fight it. A soft sigh left my lips as I succumbed to the beckoning darkness.

Chapter 5

Griffin

Apparently, there was an expected blizzard for the next few days. A bummer for some, but for me, it was welcome news. No trekkers up this side of the mountain, definitely no tourists to the Airbnb up ahead. If I had my way, there would be a blizzard every other week.

After getting enough supplies for a few months, I loaded everything in my truck, closing the back with a satisfied sigh—well, it was more of relief at my task being done. I tried my best to limit my visits to town, conscious of the curious stares, ones that made me concerned. Curiosity often led to a desire to research. I didn't want the town to know who I was. Sure, I looked nothing like the old Griffin, but the Gen Z's were smarter than my generation. I'd seen them solve mysteries far greater than mine.

I gunned the engine of my truck, ignoring the nonstop notifications on my phone. There was no need to check the screen. I already knew what they were about. For the first time in years, my books were all on bestsellers list again, an accomplishment that should've made me joyful, but it didn't. Not when it came with the attention I'd been hiding from all this time.

Lucky for me, no one knew where I was, and I'd made great efforts to ensure it stayed that way. Reporters would be pounding on my door by now, ready to snake themselves into my life for information. I didn't miss them prying into my life. In fact, I wasn't looking forward to it again. Which reminded me to call Kourtney. My sister would never reveal my whereabouts unless there was an emergency, but I still needed to check in. No doubt the vultures were circling her house, hoping for scraps of juicy info.

The shitty service in the mountains limited my access to the internet, but I saw enough. Bloggers on TikTok, most of whom had never gone to law school or trained at the police academy were busy speculating, analyzing, trying my case and sentencing me for a crime I didn't commit. A crime that didn't even exist. It would have been easier to come out of hiding and set the record straight, but I didn't want to. I kind of enjoyed the mystery, too.

With a grunt, I turned my headlights on and headed up the mountains where it was cold enough to snatch your balls off, but beyond worthy of my peace.

Light snowfall sprinkled on my windscreen as I drove, but based on my experience, it would be snowing heavily by nightfall. Thirty minutes later confirmed how right I was. The wheels on my truck groaned as it pushed through the rising snow.

Almost home, I slowed to a pause when I spotted a small bundle along the path to my cabin. At first I thought it was a deer, but immediately canceled that notion. We were too far up the mountains, especially this time of year. It was a human being, a tiny thing, nestled beside a tree, all curled up with their knees drawn to their chest.

"What the fuck," I muttered, pressing on the brakes and pulling up the handbrake.

My heart fell, assuming it was a child. Without a second thought, I swung the door open and jumped out, rushing to the bundle. I reached down and pried their head up, realizing it was a woman, whose face was as pale as the snow.

"Fuck!" I cursed, checking her pulse, breathing a relieved sigh when its steady beat bounced beneath my fingers. I slapped her cheek. "Wake up! Can you hear me?"

Her eyes fluttered open for a brief second before they closed again. I lifted her into my arms, throwing her over my shoulders. I laid her on the backseat of the truck before doubling back for her luggage. Her fucking luggage. Where the hell was she going in this weather?

Dashing back to the front, I started my truck and amped up the heat before heading to the house. Before even cutting the engine, I jumped out, taking her in my arms again. She was still asleep, although some color had returned to her cheeks. Even in this state, there was no hiding how beautiful she was, with a small, round face flattered by long lashes, a straight nose and the perfect full lips.

I laid her on the couch and wasted no time getting blankets to cover her up. Next, I moved to the fireplace, taking some freshly chopped logs and starting a fire. I glanced over to her, my eyes stationed on the rise and fall of her chest. The wise thing to do was get her out of those clothes, but she might be offended by a stranger removing them without permission.

I imagined her getting frantic, getting her lawyers involved, which meant pushing me in the spotlight. But damp, cold clothes weren't going to do her any good, so I decided to risk it, anyway. With a prayer on my lips, I stripped her coat and boots. She wore a sweater underneath which seemed fine, but her pants were soaked to her skin.

“Shit,” I muttered, taking off her hat, watching the lustrous brown hair spilling from it, covering half of her petite face. Not knowing how to go about doing the rest of her clothes, I paused and stared down at her, hoping she would wake up to do this herself. But she was out cold – literally, and if I didn’t help this stupid little damsel in distress, hypothermia could set in.

I laced a blanket over her bottom half and snaked my fingers beneath it before hooking the waistband of her pants and tugging at it. My fingers grazed against her soft skin and I gritted my teeth before I gave another hard tug that dragged it to her knees. I adjusted the blanket, knowing I’d feel guilty if I glimpsed even a bit of skin.

It felt wrong to undress her while she lay unconscious, but it was the sensible thing to do. When she woke up, I’d have a clean conscience, anyway. It was either save her life or leave her to pneumonia’s mercy.

With one last pull, the pants slid over her feet and I quickly placed another blanket over her for extra warmth. She stayed snuggled there while I wondered if my efforts were enough. Was it ever?

With a sigh, I moved to the kitchen to make a pot of coffee. There was a long night ahead. No way could I sleep until she woke up. I filled my mug and added a spoonful of sugar while pondering over who she was. Except for Alan, my closest neighbor, the cabins remained empty this time of year because of the constant blizzards. Why was she here on this side of the mountain? There were no sign of anyone else on the road, so why did she come alone? The last thing I wanted was trouble, and a gnawing feeling in my stomach told she was exactly that.

I could only hope she recovered soon. As soon as she woke, I’d send her on her way.

Chapter 6

Victoria

My eyes fluttered open, my nose instantly picking up the scent of freshly brewed coffee. My mind registered how blissfully warm and comfortable I was, everything soft around me, fresh air filling my lungs as I took breaths. I couldn't help my smile, thinking I'd arrived in heaven, but as the seconds passed, my memories returned. The last thing I remembered was lying on the side of the road, so cold I couldn't move. I remembered the icy wind stinging my face, my entire body going numb before I lost consciousness. I didn't need to look around to know I wasn't on the side of the road anymore, which meant someone found and brought me here.

I bolted upright, my heart hammering in my chest as I took in the impressive floor-to-ceiling fireplace in the massive room. The walls and ceilings were planked with reclaimed pine, with a chandelier made of antique wagon wheel. A wood-planked coffee table stood between a pair of tufted sofas, one of which I'd been laying on. The room looked cozy, but it didn't ease my fear. Where was I? Who brought me here?

As if summoned by my thoughts, a giant stepped through the door, surprise on his face when he saw me. He stopped short; his thick arms laden with firewood. His blue eyes slowly ran over me. A chill ran down my spine despite the warmth in the room, and I wrapped my arms around my body.

"Good, you're awake," he grunted. "Finally, I can sleep."

His words made no sense to me, not when I had no clue what was going on. "W– how did I get here?" I asked, looking down and realizing I didn't have my coat on and — I flashed the blankets from around me without thinking of him being there. My bare thighs welcomed me. I gasped, seeing all I had on was my cotton panties.

My chest tightened with panic. I could feel the blood draining from my face. "What the fuck? What did you do?" I asked, heat coursing through my body.

He grunted, staring down at me with thick brows drawn together.

"You had no right to take my clothes off! I– what else did you do to me?" I snapped, pulling the blankets over my body.

His gaze lingered for a while, giving me those tingles again, but they faded when he shifted his eyes and walked to the fireplace. I glared at his broad back, struggling with the urge to throw a pillow at him. I hated being ignored.

He came back toward me after dumping fresh logs on the fireplace. I waited for him to say something, but he walked past me without a word. Pissed, I shuffled from the couch, the blanket wrapped around me. “Are you going to answer me, or do I need to call my lawyer?”

I swore I heard him growl, but maybe I imagined it. I had no time to decide if it was real, because he’d whipped around, his glare sharp enough to cut tires. My eyes locked with his, and two thoughts immediately ran through my mind. One: how incredibly beautiful his blue eyes were, and two: how familiar he looked.

Before I said a word, he moved past me, grabbed my clothes from the armrest of the sofa and shoved them at me. “Get out.”

I took my clothes, still studying his face, my brain connecting the pieces of the puzzle. This was Griffin Holt – no denying it. He wasn’t the slim, athletic man I’d seen in the photos online. His body was now six feet of thick, delicious muscles. Gone was the kindness in his eyes. They were now like ice.

Despite the chill surrounding him and the rudeness in his tone, I refused to believe he had no saving grace. He saved me from freezing to death, after all, which counted for something, right?

Maybe I was too harsh with my approach. There was no excuse for going off on him, despite waking up flustered in a strange place. I should have responded more gently.

Clearing my throat, I moved closer to him. “I’m sorry about the whole lawyer thing. I didn’t mean to come off so ungrateful. Thank you for saving me.”

“I don’t give a rat’s ass about your apology. Leave.” He grabbed my shoulder, steering me toward the front door.

“Wait a minute, let me get my clothes on, at least!” I shrieked, shrugging him off and stepping into my pants. His behavior was a little too harsh, considering I’d just apologized. Was his wife and child home? Was he trying to protect them from strangers?

If so, why?

“Shit.”

Griffin stood at the open front door, his broad back blocking the

view outside. I didn't need to see, though. The roaring wind was enough to confirm there was a snowstorm outside. Which meant I couldn't leave. Which also meant I'd be holed up with Griffin Holt and the secrets between these walls.

A welcomed opportunity, but one that could backfire if I didn't play my cards right. I could tell him who I was, but I doubted he would give me a story, especially after being in such a hurry to put me out. He wouldn't take kindly to a reporter trying to dig into his past.

Which meant… oh, boy.

For the first time, I'd lie for what I wanted.

"You're lucky I'm not a heartless piece of shit," he muttered, walking past me. "You're welcome to stay until the storm blows over."

I contained my glee, watching as he moved to the window and yanking up the blinds. From where I stood, there was nothing to see except the mist that had formed on the windows, but from Griffin's point of view, there was something there.

He muttered a low curse, raking his hand through his thick, long hair, leaving me with a sudden urge to run my fingers through it, too. My eyes dropped to his back, covered in a long-sleeved sweatshirt and his firm buttocks strapped in a pair of jeans. I still couldn't believe this was the same man I saw online. Back then he seemed approachable, with his friendly smile, spectacles and polo shirts. Now, he was like a tall, muscled god; beautiful but unapproachable.

"Spare room's empty," he mumbled under his breath, barely audible.

"Thank you. As soon as the snowstorm ends, I'll be out of your hair," I reassured him. *Hopefully, it lasts long enough to get my story.*

Griffin grunted, making a slow turn to face me. "I've been trying to figure this out since I found you on the road. Why did you come here?" he asked, a frown on his face.

His question threw me off guard. The chill in his eyes triggered my nervousness. I racked my brain for a suitable explanation. If he knew who I was, he'd probably throw me out, but I was just a stupid, unsuspecting stranger, then maybe he would give me a story without me even asking for it.

"I er… booked an Airbnb close by, but the cab driver refused to go further when the snowstorm began. I thought I'd make it before the storm got worse, but I underestimated the damn thing."

Griffin stared me down, his intense gaze piercing me. I tried to squirm, knowing my actions could betray me. A long beat passed. I slowly released my breath, waiting for him to break eye contact. Heck, if someone ever got interrogated by this guy, they'd spill within seconds.

"You took the wrong route," he finally said, his voice deep and growly.

I shrugged. "I saw the road, thought it would lead me there."

"Hmm." He glanced to the window. "One would think you'd have the sense to check the weather reports before you came. Where are you from, anyway?"

"Lo—New York," I quickly replied, kicking myself for almost slipping up.

He turned again to look at me, his gaze sweeping over my body. "A city girl. Why am I not surprised?"

I cleared my throat. "I'm Victoria, by the way."

"Guest room is first door to your left," he said, turning to leave.

"Wha– what's your name?"

He paused; the hesitance clear on his face. "Griffin."

A tiny smile pulled at the corner of my lips. "Thank you, Griffin."

He left without another word, his huge body disappearing down the hall. I sighed, turning to the blazing fire pit, the crackling wood soothing my nerves a bit. I wrapped the huge blanket around me, the scent of fresh soap washing over me. I took a sniff, noticing the hint of male perfume. No doubt Griffin's huge body had been wrapped in it at some point.

I wandered around the living area, checking out the space. Somehow, I'd expected a sign that someone else lived here, but there was nothing – not a single photo in sight – not even of him. I thought of his family, the wife who was pregnant with his child. Where were they? Why weren't they with him? Did Griffin divorce his wife?

My mind ran all over, trying to figure out the mystery behind this grumpy man. It was somewhat scary being alone in his, presence, especially after the rumors of him being a murderer who had gotten away with his crime.

I expected to feel fearful, but I didn't. For some reason, Griffin made me feel safe. He was an asshole, but he would never harm me. It was a stupid to trust a man I didn't know, but my instincts were never wrong.

Gathering my luggage, I wandered down the hallway trying to find the guestroom, since the grump hadn't even bothered to make the instructions clear. I stopped at the first door that was halfway open, confirming it was empty before stepping inside. The room looked cozy, with a double bed, a single vanity in one corner and a lounge chair at the next. I carefully placed my things on the chair then dug through my carryon for a change of clothes. There was an ensuite bathroom, thank God. After a quick shower, I pulled on a pair of sweatpants and a sweater then used a hair tie to bound my hair into a ponytail.

I flopped down on the bed with a sigh, trying to figure out what my next move would be. There was no way to determine how long the snowstorm would last, but had the end, I had to leave victorious. Griffin's story would be mine.

Chapter 7

Griffin

With a grunt, I removed the glasses from my eyes and threw them to the table. I pinched the bridge of my nose and closed my eyes, unable to concentrate on a single thing but the woman on the next side of my house.

It annoyed me; this stupid fascination with a woman I just met. This was so unlike me. Why couldn't I get the feel of her small body out of my head? Why couldn't I stop wanting her legs wrapped around me? I remembered licking my lips when she threw off the blankets in panic. I tried to look away, but not quick enough. The urge to rip those panties off and bury myself in her heat almost sucked the breath out of me. I'd never responded to a woman like that.

Fuck.

I blamed it on not getting laid in years. It had nothing to do with her beauty, although, I couldn't deny how stunning she was.

But there were always more to people than their pretty faces and I had a feeling this woman was no exception. For a woman forced to hole up with a stranger, she didn't seem as frightened as I'd expected. Which made me wonder if she knew who I was. That wouldn't surprise me, considering the internet craze.

No. She wouldn't ask my name if she knew me. Which led me to believe she was more naïve than I thought. Lucky for her, I wasn't the monster the internet made me out to be.

Naïve or not, the last thing I'd wanted was to be trapped inside the house with a woman who triggered emotions that had been dead for years. After living with the numbness for so long, it became an old friend, a safe friend, one I didn't want to part with.

With a grunt, I rose from my chair, heading to the kitchen to pour another cup of coffee. To my surprise, I found her there doing the same thing, looking comfy like she'd been living there for years. With her hair in a cute ponytail, a sexy pair of leggings hugging her tiny body, she didn't seem out of place to me. In fact, I could picture her living in my space.

Crazy. I brushed the stupid, sudden longing aside.

Her head flew up as I approached, her hand with the pot

pausing over the cup. “I figured I could help myself to a cup…”

A low rumble bubbled up in my throat. As attractive as Victoria was, I didn’t need her in my space. I didn’t need her around me. Staying in the guestroom was one thing, but to be bumping into her around the house was another. Regardless, I said nothing. There was enough coffee to spare, anyway.

When she was finished, I moved into the space and poured myself a cup. She didn’t leave as I expected. I frowned at her, wondering why she was still standing there.

Victoria either misread my expression or chose to ignore it. “You live alone?” she asked, taking a sip and watching me from over the rim.

Without replying, I added sugar to my cup, my jaw tightening with displeasure. I didn’t have to give her the time of day – I was already nice enough to allow her to stay. Surely, she couldn’t be expecting conversation, too.

“Pretty isolated place to live in…” she continued, despite my silence.

I scoffed.

“Look, I’m sorry if I’m imposing; I want this snow to stop as much as you do.”

I moved past her, but I could hear her footsteps following behind.

“You just expect us to spend our time together without talking?” she challenged.

I stopped short and turned to face her. She gasped, braking in her tracks to stop from bumping into me. Her coffee spilled onto her sweater and she groaned, fanning the wet spot.

“Damnit,” she grumbled.

My instinct prompted me to grab a napkin to dab the spot, but I ignored it. I didn’t want to touch her again. Not even for a minute.

“It won’t leave a stain, I hope.” She peered up at me, our eyes locking for a few seconds. A few seconds too long. Something passed between us. I didn’t know what it was, but it left me longing to pull her body to mine and taste that coffee on her lips. Not willing to succumb to the urge, I grunted and moved off again.

“We don’t need to be friends, Griffin, but we’re alone here—”

“Don’t fucking remind me,” I muttered before I could stop

myself. Knowing there was no physical power to hold me back made resisting her so much harder. My cock had awakened from its slumber, getting harder the longer I lingered.

"All I'm saying is, we can pass the time by getting to know each other. What's the harm in that?"

I scoffed as she flopped down in the sofa. "You just don't give up, do you?"

Victoria smirked, her thin lips stretched into a smile. "Where's the fun in that?"

The hint of mischief on her face made my brows lift. Was she really a naïve girl who booked a vacation on the mountain alone—a stupid decision I might add—or was there another layer under that façade? Time would probably tell. Or not. In a day or two, she'd be gone, a distant memory in a week.

Although, my intuition told me that won't be the case.

"You're trouble," I told her as I left, unwilling to stay in her presence any longer. Victoria was like a drug. There was no physical interaction, yet I was already intoxicated. Already wanting more of her. This was too crazy. Too scary. I needed a distraction right away.

"If I'm trouble as you say, maybe I should just go!" she called after me and I scoffed. She wouldn't leave. Not when she almost froze the last time. I wanted to tell her she could go, but I wouldn't enjoy digging her out the snow again. Maybe I should have left her the first time. If only I knew she would be this chatty and persistent. If only I knew how much she would affect me.

Victoria considered me an asshole, but it was a trait I mastered over the years, determined not to repeat mistakes from my past. I didn't want her getting attached to me, either. With her girl-next-door smile, and the innocence behind her eyes, I suspected Victoria was that type.

There was just something about her that made everything seem lightweight. Like the aura she carried around her was something special. But weren't they all, until you truly got to know who they really were?

Regardless, she intrigued me, which surprised the heck out of me, considering no woman had caught my eye in such a long time. There was just something about her that made me want to lose myself in her.

It's just the loneliness talking, I told myself. *There's no way I want this stranger in my life.*

Blowing a sigh, I finished the rest of my coffee and pored over the contents that placed me on the map again. News of me were everywhere. The sales on my books were insane, but it meant nothing, though it should. A part of me craved that excitement, but it remained confined in the depth of my soul.

Needing that distraction, I opened a blank sheet on Microsoft Word, my fingers hovering over the keyboard. My mind opened, releasing my pent-up thoughts and in an instant, words flew around in my head – a promise of a fictional world where I had the power to make the impossible possible.

***

Later that night, still sitting in my office, I heard the shower running which momentarily caught me off guard. Caught up with my writing, I'd forgotten there was someone in this house. Now, I wish I didn't remember, because the only thing on my mind was the image of her in that stall, naked, water cascading over her curves. I stifled a groan when I imaged the rivulets running between her thighs, caressing her pussy—

Fuck.

I scrubbed my face with a sigh, willing the forbidden image away. Time to get some food and sleep. Exhaustion was doing a number on my head.

Exiting the office, I intended to head for the kitchen. Instead, I turned the other way, walking to the guest bedroom. I paused at the closed door before I knocked, telling myself this was a simple invitation to dinner, nothing else.

Victoria opened the door, her scent washing over me, filling me with unanticipated warmth. She still wore her hair up, knotted on the top of her head while a few tendrils gracefully fell around her face, caressing her cheeks. She wore a large T-shirt that skimmed past her knees, the neck hole draping down one shoulder and exposing soft, pristine skin. I cleared my throat and shifted my eyes to her face.

"It's been hours, but thank you for checking on me," she said, her voice thick with sarcasm.

I resisted the urge to roll my eyes. "You're not a child, Victoria. I didn't need to check on you."

"Then why are you here, Griffin?" Her tone had shifted, now edgy and tight.

"Just checking if you're hungry. There's food in the kitchen," I said.

She shook her head. “I’m fine.”

I gritted my teeth, having no patience for her attitude. Pretty presumptuous, considering this was my house.

“Next time remind me not to ask,” I grumbled.

She crossed her arms under her breasts, making them more pronounced under the shirt. “Oh, I don’t think you’ll need any help with that,” she shot back.

I left her standing there, almost smiling at her frustrated groan. Considering she’d helped herself to coffee earlier, I figured she would’ve raided the fridge when she got hungry. If she didn’t, too bad. I wasn’t used to having guests in my house.

I made a few batches of ham sandwiches, wondering in the back of my mind if she even liked ham. Maybe I could ask her, but I didn’t want to. Not after her snarky attitude. Everyone liked ham, anyway. I plated her share, then returned to the office with mine, listening for the sound of her footsteps going down the hall.

After an hour, there was still no sounds from her, leaving me wondering if she was madder than I thought. Deciding to let it go, I went back to work, but I soon heard shuffling, following by a clinking sound. Shortly after, a shatter sounded and I bolted from my seat, dashing from the room, worried she’d gotten hurt.

I found her muttering a string of curses, hopping to steady herself on the side of the counter, the plate of sandwiches right next to her and broken glass on the floor. She had a leg propped in the air, blood running from her feet. Her face reddened when she saw me. I didn’t know if it was from the embarrassment of being caught or the pain from the injury.

I moved to her, but she fanned me away. “I’ll be fine,” she breathed, but her face tightened with unmistakable pain.

Without thinking – something I was stupid enough to not do – I reached for her, my arm curling around her slender back as I lifted her. Too late, I realized what a mistake this was, especially with her softness pressed against me. With her so close, my commonsense flew out the window.

Not wanting to surrender, I hurried with her to the living room, dropping her a little too hard on the couch. Victoria sucked air through her teeth, reaching for her injured foot. A tiny shard of glass remained stuck between, minimizing the blood flow.

“Don’t move,” I said, hastily moving my office and pulling out a first-aid kit from a drawer. I returned to find Victoria inspecting the

wound while trying to pluck the piece of glass from it.

"No!"

But as I spoke, she picked it out, gasping at the heavy blood flow.

"What the hell were you thinking?" I asked, flipping open the first aid kid and yanking the roll of gauze.

She looked at me, her eyes slightly glistening as I pressed the gauze to the wound. "Don't worry, I'm not going to bleed out on your floor," she said, her manicured toes scrunched up to mask the pain.

After reducing the blood flow, I reached for the cotton to dress the wound. "I can do the rest by myself, thanks," she quickly said, reaching for the cotton. I backed off, wincing in unison each time she applied the disinfectant. The pain on her face and the obvious distress made me want to take over—made me want to take care of her. But I held back, suppressing my superhero complex. This damsel in distress didn't need rescuing.

"All done," she said after applying the Band-Aid. She shot me a breathtaking smile, one that triggered my own.

"You're not as helpless as I thought, are you?"

She scoffed, dumping the used cotton on top of the kit. "What gave you that impression, you rescuing me from the snowstorm?"

I shrugged. "Maybe."

Another scoff, and she fixed me with a direct stare. "I'm not helpless, Griffin. I've been taking care of myself since I was a kid. My mom was a single parent who worked two jobs, which meant I grew up fast. I can take care of myself. Don't let that little incident fool you."

"Noted." I raised my hands in mock surrender while admiring her a little more. Yes, definitely no damsel in distress. Before me was a tough woman who knew how to handle herself.

Which made me question, why would she make such a rash mistake coming here?

"I'm sorry for snapping," she muttered, blowing a breath. "I just hate people handling me with kid gloves because of my size."

Against my commonsense, I reached out and squeezed her hand. "I understand. It's fine."

Our gazes locked. She looked down to where our hands linked, then back at me, licking her lips. There was this intense need to kiss

her, to find out if her lips were just as sweet as her face. Against the warning in my head, I reached up, brushing the stray lock from her face. Her eyes flickered shut and she breathed a sigh, prompting me to lean in.

We were so close; I could feel her breath on me. One move, and our lips would meet. Our bodies would become one. I remained where I was, my common-sense fighting against the magnetic force between us.

Victoria's eyes flew open, confusion resting between them. "Griffin," she whispered.

I heard the need in her tone, and I struggled with the urge to fulfil that need. The image of me spreading her wide on the carpet was so vivid. All I wanted to do was make her moan. But before I could do anything I'd regret later, I eased back, watching the blush spreading on her cheeks as her gaze dropped to her feet.

"Um… you should keep off that foot for a while." I pat the space beside her. "Relax. I'll clean up the mess."

"No," she protested. "It's my mess. Let me—"

I gripped her chin, tilting her head and lashing her with a stern glare. "Hey. This is my house, and what I say goes, got it?"

She stared up at me with unflinching eyes. "Got it."

I witnessed a ghost of a smile on her lips before I disappeared into the kitchen.

Chapter 8

Victoria

Screw my stupid clumsiness. If I hadn't been so off kilter, I wouldn't have suffered the embarrassment of getting caught like a thief stealing food. My face still burned when I remembered hearing Griffin's footsteps and seeing him appear in the kitchen before I could react. I was still mad at him for ignoring me all day, and my pride wouldn't admit how hungry I was when he offered me dinner. Instead, I sneaked to the kitchen, hoping to grab and go. I was in such a rush, I didn't notice the drink glass perched on the counter. It fell over when my hand bumped against it.

I still couldn't get over how Griffin ran to my aid, the concern in his eyes. My heart fluttered when he lifted me, and I didn't want him to put me down. For some reason, it touched me when he offered to dress my wound, although I opted to do it myself. Maybe Griffin wasn't the villain people made him out to be.

Something happened to him. I didn't know what it was, but it transformed him into someone barely recognizable. Maybe his gruffness was a tactic to hide the pain, but he still had a few redeemable qualities. Hopefully, he'd give me a chance to show the world how decent he was.

I closed my room door, biting my lips as I gingerly made my way to the bed. Griffin wanted to carry me, but I'd had enough of him. It was hell trying to control myself around him in the living room. I would fare worse in this intimate space where the cozy bed gave me a one-track mind. Sex, sex and more sex; I wanted nothing more.

Trying to recall the last time I got laid, I sat at the edge of the bed, examining the injury on my foot. The cut wasn't so deep, but it would take a week before it healed. Maybe my stay would be extended, after all. But could I handle being alone with Griffin without giving into my desire for him?

There was no denying how attracted to him I was. It didn't matter how dirty it made me feel; I couldn't help myself. My body was still on fire from the memory of his thick arms that carried me to the living room. When he touched my bare skin again on the couch, I craved for more. We almost kissed. So close, I could almost taste him

on my lips. I hated myself for being disappointed when he pulled back. He had a wife and child for God's sake—at least, as far as I knew.

I came for a story, not to get laid.

A loud sigh escaped as I dropped back on the bed. *God, why can't I have both? Just once. Just a taste.*

For some reason, I doubted one taste would be enough. Not with a man like Griffin. He seemed like the kind of man who dominated in bed, leaving a mark no other man could remove.

I groaned, palming my face. Now I couldn't get that image out of my head, the one with Griffin fucking me into a moaning mess, my knees pressed to my shoulder, my fingers gripping the sheet—

No. I'm not going to lose my mind. Let me find something constructive to do.

I reached for my phone. The snowstorm had affected the signal in the mountains, making my phone useless since I got there. But when I checked that time around, I few bars were up, and I called Ashley.

"OMG, Vicky, I've been worried sick! Where the hell were you?" she asked when the line opened. "I was about to file a missing person's report, you know."

"It's a long story, but I'm at Griffin's cabin," I whispered, not knowing if he was nearby.

"Wait…it's almost nine o'clock, isn't it? What are you doing there so late?"

"Like I said, it's a long story. I'm stuck here for a while. There's a snowstorm going on that will last for God knows how long. Ash, Griffin lives in the middle of nowhere."

"What, does he know you're a journalist?"

I glanced towards the closed door before. "No. The guy's about as cuddly as a cactus. There's no way I could have told him that."

There was a short pause. "So, how do you plan on getting the story?"

I scratched the top of my head. "Maybe I could get him to open up–"

"Vicky, that's deceiving. Way too low for you."

"What do you want me to do?" I whispered. "My hands are basically tied, Ash. My job is on the line here."

“Is it worth losing your morals? You’re better than this. Listen, maybe you could tell him who you are and he’ll talk.”

“I’m telling you Ash; that would be worse. He’d probably kick me out if he found out. It’s snowing a shit ton out there. I won’t survive.”

The was a long beat on Ashley end. “Whatever you decide, just make sure it’s the right thing,” she finally said.

I sighed. “Okay. Hey, you may not hear from me for a while. The signal is crap up here.”

She giggled. “Well, at least you’re shacked up with a hot guy. He’s still hot, right?”

“That’s an understatement, believe me. His photos have nothing on the real thing.”

“Damn…”

“Yup.” I stifled a moan, remembering the heat in his eyes when he leaned into me.

“Well, being is holed up is definitely not the worst thing. You need to get laid. Perfect timing.”

I rolled my eyes. “Please, I know absolutely nothing about this guy,” I said, trying to get the almost-kiss out of my head.

“That stopped no one. Certainly not me. Random sex can be so good, Vicky.”

I moaned. “You’re a terrible influence.”

“Although I doubt Griffin Holt is hardly your type. Don’t you like them big and bearded and tough as nails?”

I cleared my throat, the heat rising to my cheeks. If only Ashley knew Griffin was exactly how she described— exactly my type. I tucked that secret to the back of my mind. The last thing I wanted was her fueling to the temptation that plagued me.

“Right, he’s the opposite,” I said.

She laughed at that. “Well, a change is probably what you need. How long as it been now since you got laid? Three years?”

I shook my head, trying to hold back my smile. “I have better things to think about than sex.”

Ashley snorted. “You just haven’t found the right person yet. Or maybe he’s in the other room.”

I sighed heavily. “I gotta go, Ashley. It’s been a long day and

I'm exhausted. Talk to you later, okay?"

"Okay. Be careful and remember what I said."

"Will do," I replied before disconnecting the call with a sigh.

I considered what Ashley said about my morals and it left me torn on what to do. Pearson expected a story—no, a groundbreaking piece—and I wasn't even close to getting one. After getting this far, could I really return with nothing?

Either way, there was no guarantee Griffin would open up to me, journalist or not. I was walking on a very thin line that grew more fragile with each passing second.

**

I woke up the following morning to the smell of bacon permeating my room. My stomach rumbled, which reminded me I hadn't eaten since yesterday. Because of my injury, I hadn't bothered to eat the sandwiches Griffin left for me.

After freshening up, I hobbled to the kitchen, careful to keep the pressure off my injured foot. Griffin stood in the open kitchen, wearing a sweater with the sleeves rolled up to the elbows and a pair of dark jeans. Simple, but sexy. I envied every piece of his clothing.

As if sensing my presence, Griffin turned and saw me, his gaze momentarily sweeping over my frame. Getting dressed earlier, I convinced myself that I didn't choose the one-piece jumpsuit for him. The appreciation on his face, and the responding warmth that ran from my head to toes made me realize I wanted to look good for him.

"Good morning," I greeted him.

"Good morning," he mumbled before his gaze dropped to my feet. "How's the foot?"

"I'll live."

He returned his attention to the stove and I stood there awkwardly, not knowing what to say. Talking to this man was like walking on thin ice. You press too hard and it's over. But I couldn't get anything out of him if I didn't talk.

"Want some help?" I asked.

"No," he answered curtly.

He'd clearly had a terrible night, considering he'd been in a decent mood when I saw him last. "Okay… mind if I help myself to

some coffee?"

He released a heavy sigh and grumbled, but I took that as a yes and moved toward the pot. "Thanks," I said as I poured a cup. "When do you think the snowstorm will end?"

"I don't know," he mumbled, his jaw clenching.

"Why would someone want to live here all by themselves?" I continued. I didn't know why, but I had a childish urge to get a rile out of him.

"Peace!" he snapped, slamming his large hands to the counter and glaring at me. His nostrils flared; the edges of his lips pulled tight.

Maybe this wasn't a good idea, after all. "Sorry."

Our gazes met for a brief second and something flickered in his eyes before he slid a plate across the counter to me. I took it and glanced at the contents: bacon, scrambled eggs and a bagel.

"Thank you."

He didn't reply—no surprise. I moved to a barstool around the counter, digging in right away. My eyes flew shut on the first bite. I moaned, forgetting I had company. Griffin was either a good cook or I was simply too hungry to decide whether it was good.

I opened my eyes to find Griffin staring at me with an expression I couldn't quite figure out, but it made me warm all over. Without saying a word, he turned to leave but with a quick swallow, I wanted him to do the opposite. "Please stay… I could use the company."

He paused for a second, pivoting to stare at me as if trying to figure out whether he should stay. With the sharp intake of his breath, he came to me, taking the stool on the opposite end, a large stack of food on his plate.

"Thanks again for your help last night," I told him.

"It was nothing," he mumbled under his breath. "Especially since you did most of the work yourself."

"Well, you cleaned up my mess. That was major. So, thanks."

He grunted with a nod, shoveling food in his mouth.

A long silence stretched between us, during which I tried to find an opening for my questioning.

"So… Griffin. Don't you get lonely here all by yourself?" I finally asked.

“I don’t.”

“How come? There are no houses for miles around. No TV, hardly any service. What do you do for fun?”

Another grunt.

“What about a family? Ever considered having one?”

Griffin looked up at me, his eyes carrying a chill. “You really ask a lot of questions.”

“Just trying to make conversation.”

He eased up a little, placing his fork on his plate. “How about you tell me something about you?”

I shrugged. “There’s hardly anything interesting in my life. I’d probably bore you to death.”

His face brightened with interest as he drew for his cup of coffee. “Please, do tell.”

I licked my lips and tore my gaze away from his, desperate for any other distraction. “I er– grew up in a small neighborhood with my mom. As I mentioned before, she worked two jobs, so she was hardly ever home, but it wasn’t all that bad. I had my best friend Ashley to keep me company.” I smiled, glancing at my plate. “She’s a nurse who constantly complains about her job, but she loves it regardless; she loves to help people… which is why it’s the perfect job for her.”

He grunted as if understanding perfectly what I was talking about. I figured I wouldn’t get a word out of him if I tried, and so I continued. “I didn’t really have a dad; he left my mom a few weeks before I was born,” I said, reaching for my coffee with a scoff. “Weird thing is, they were engaged before. Like, who leaves their pregnant fiancée hanging like that? How can you claim to love someone then betray them?”

Griffin stiffened in his seat. It seemed that bit had gotten his attention. Still, he said nothing.

“People change I guess. It’s stupid to think they will always love you,” I continued.

“Hmm.”

I twisted in my seat, directing my full attention to him. “Do you believe in love, Griffin?” I asked.

He shoved his plate to the side. “No. It’s just a lie people use at their own convenience.”

It was the longest string of words he’d said since I entered the

kitchen. Greedy for more, I tried to prompt him. “Meaning?”

“It’s like sex, Victoria,” he replied. “People use it as bargaining chip. A woman wants money from a man, she spreads her legs. A man wants sex from a woman, he says I love you.”

“Or, it could be the other way around,” I point out. “Women say ‘I love you’ to get what they want, too.”

Griffin shrugged. “I guess.”

“You don’t sound convinced. Don’t tell me you’re gender biased, Griffin.”

For the first time since being here, the ghost of a smile played at his lips, which made him even more attractive. Which led me to wonder; Griffin Holt was a good-looking guy—no scratch that, he was a freaking God, capable of making any woman fall to their knees. From the absence of a feminine touch in the house, it was pretty obvious he and his wife weren’t together anymore. Why was he still living alone?

“I’m not biased. I’m just a realist. I’ve been alive long enough to know what I’m talking about. Thirty-eight years, in fact.” His eyes ran over me, leaving goosebumps on my skin. “What are you, twenty? You have no clue about the ways of the world.”

“I’m twenty-five years old, thank you very much. And I’ve been around the block a few times. I know enough.”

Another smile tugged the corner of his lips. “That’s not something I would admit in public, if I were you.”

It took me a moment to catch on, and when I did, I reached over and slapped his arm, marveling at how firm it was. “Get your mind out of the gutter! I’m not talking about my body count. I’ve had to grow up fast so I’m not your average twenty-five-year-old.”

“Still a baby,” he replied, sliding off his stool.

I got up too, completely forgetting my injured my foot. A sharp ache shot up my leg, and I grabbed onto the counter with a shriek. To my surprise, Griffin flew my side, wrapping his arm around my waist.

“Hey, I got you,” he whispered.

Our eyes met, the heat within his big, beautiful blue orbs making my stomach clench. My eyes dropped to his lips, the urge to kiss him so strong I could almost taste him. I twisted from his hold, tipping on my good toes. Would he back off if I kissed him? Did I dare try?

I couldn't deprive myself. Not when he was so close, not when the scent of his body was like a drug, slowly pulling me in. With a deep sigh, I leaned in, my lips touching his. I closed my eyes, welcoming the softness against mine. I nibbled his lips, prompting his response but he stiffened. I tried again. His erection pressed against my belly, telling me his hesitation had nothing to do with him not wanting me. I teased my tongue against the seam of his lips and he suddenly opened up, his tongue meeting mine. He groaned, pulling me closer, my chest pressed against his as the kiss spiraled into deep passion. He sucked on my tongue, sending sparks of pleasure running through me. His beard tickled my skin but didn't distract me from what a good kisser he was. In fact, an airplane crash couldn't steal my attention, not with how he ate my mouth like it was his last meal. I matched his hard strokes, rolling my body against him, my panties soaked with my arousal.

I'd never reacted to a man like this before, not with this wild, desperate need. It excited me, but it scared me, because I knew how vulnerable it made me. A desire like this only meant one thing; Griffin had the power to make me fall for him. It was the biggest contradiction to my plans. After getting my story, I planned to leave Anchorage without turning back. I couldn't afford to fall in love.

Still, it wasn't enough to make me stop, especially when Griffin gripped my ass, grinding his hard cock against my aching front. I moaned, rocking my hips, hungry for more than this dry humping. I wanted him inside me, so freaking badly. My hands flew to his belt, deftly unbuckling it, but he pulled back, shaking his head.

"Fuck," he muttered, breathing a harsh sigh.

"It's fine – I…" I trailed off, not knowing what to say. But the longer we stood there, the more I sensed the wall rising between us. My heart lurched in my chest as I reached for him. "Griffin—"

"No. We're not doing this."

Ouch. Not exactly what I wanted to hear after such a mind-blowing kiss, but it didn't surprise me. Griffin's hot and cold behavior had been constant since the morning I woke up in his living room. Right now, it was freezing cold. I wanted to give up on even trying with him – story or not. He was clearly impenetrable. There was nothing I could do to change that.

Plus, my mind was still filled with what if's about him – hell, I didn't know him at all. Until then, I'd keep my distance. No, I need to stay away, regardless.

Reminding myself of my agenda, I watched as Griffin lifted his

unfinished plate and left the room. I sighed, kicking myself for my rash behavior earlier. What the hell was wrong with me?

Chapter 9

Victoria

I laid in bed staring at the wooden ceiling, bored out of my mind with not the slightest thing to do. There was still no signal on my devices. I couldn't wander around the house like I wanted to. Not after what took place in the kitchen earlier. I suspected Griffin was mad at me for making a move on him.

But I grew reckless, so I decided to go out, anyway. Better to have Griffin yell at me for getting into his private space than dying of boredom in this room. I walked down the hallway, coming upon another room at the far end which I presumed to be Griffin's. The door was closed, and I wondered if he was inside. My hands slid against the bare walls, still unable to believe that there wasn't even a picture frame in sight. There was not a drop of personality to his home and I found that odd.

As I continued, I came upon another room with the door slightly ajar. I paused, glancing down the hall as I contemplated going inside. There was not a sign of Griffin anywhere, which made me believe— and hope— that he was taking a nap.

I bit my lower lip, careful not to make a sound as I slowly slid through the half-opened door. My mouth slightly parted with surprise when I realized where I was. No doubt this was Griffin's office, the only room in the house with personality. I feasted my eyes on the ceiling-to-floor bookshelves filled with books.

"Wow," I whispered, going farther in, trailing my hands across the spine of the books arranged in alphabetical order. His desk stood in the center of the room with a closed laptop, a stack of his books on the left and several awards on the right. On the wall were photos of him at book signings, plus a few abstract oil paintings. Everything seemed in perfect order, every shelf well-polished, glistening under the glow of the single lighting in the center of the ceiling.

Griffin's scent filled the air – a perfect mix of cedar wood and sweet oranges. I could tell he spent quality time there. My eyes caught a picture frame in a corner of the room. It was a photo of Griffin and his sister – Kourtney, only younger, with sparkles in their eyes that were gone now. Whatever happened to Griffin affected Kourtney, too. I took down the frame and analyzed it, seeing their resemblance. A picture was worth a thousand words, but this one gave me nothing. I

wished the answers were there. If only it could explain what happened to Griffin Holt.

"The fuck are you doing in here?" Griffin's voice suddenly demanded behind me.

The frame fell from my hand, shattering on the floor. I gasped at the deadly expression on Griffin's face. He came toward me, his dark brows drawn together, his lips in a thin line as his eyes shot daggers at me.

"I'm sorry–"

"Get out!" he exclaimed, his face darkening with a deep scowl.

"I was just–"

"Snooping around," he cut in. "A right I did not give you!"

I flinched, tears pricking my eyes. I swallowed, determined not to cry.

"I'm sorry, but I didn't do anything. I was just admiring your work."

He growled, his chest rising and falling with deep breaths. "I don't want you in my fucking space," he said between clenched teeth, each word punctuated.

The tears finally dribbled down my face. "You are such a fucking asshole!" I snapped. "You know what, I don't have to take this. Fuck you!" I marched past him and slammed the door shut behind me. I might have been desperate for a story, but I didn't have to put up with Griffin's bullshit. Not anymore.

I stomped to my room, briskly moving to my carryon. I shoved my clothes inside, tears pitching from my eyes – which was stupid. I felt stupid. Why was I crying over this asshole? He didn't deserve my tears.

Ignoring the dull ache in my heart, I slung my bag over my shoulder and pulled at the carryon, not caring about the noise as the wheels tumbled through the house. I opened the front door and a gust of wind had me pausing as I squinted. A shiver passed over me. I probably wouldn't make it far in this weather, but I'll be damned if I didn't try.

Chapter 10

Griffin

I raked a hand through my hair and muttered a curse under my breath, seeing the shattered pieces of glass on the floor, but that wasn't the least of my worries anymore. What had gotten to me was the look on Victoria's face when I had shouted at her. The panic in her eyes, the paleness her face and the tears that instantly filled her eyes.

Guilt tickled my conscience, my heart heavy from knowing I caused her sadness. That was the last thing I'd wanted, although I didn't enjoy seeing her in my office. This space was only for *my* comfort. Seeing her there threatened to uproot my peace. Which was no excuse, which meant I should apologize.

But as soon as I cleaned up the mess, I heard a rumbling through the house, followed by the opening of the front door. It took me a second to realize what was happening, but as soon as I did, I grabbed my coat and rushed after her.

I wanted to kick myself repeatedly for behaving like I did, but the damage was already done. As I opened the front door, the cold blast of air told me that Victoria wouldn't make it far.

Fuck. I hoped this wasn't déjà vu.

Lucky for me—well, her, the snowstorm has eased enough for me to see her tracks. With a prayer on my lips, I followed, surprised she was moving so fast in the deep snow.

"Victoria!" I called, hearing her name on my lips for the first time. The only reply that came was from the whistling air.

I tried not to panic, battling with the fear of her being hurt. If she was, I couldn't live with myself, knowing she left the house because of how I treated her. The cold soon numbed my face, making me aware of the drop in the temperature, I had to find her soon, or else…

No. Positive thoughts only. I will find her.

As I turned a bend, I spotted a figure in the distance, moving a slow pace, pulling a suitcase through the snow. Relief flooded me. I picked up the pace, catching up with her as she slumped to her knees.

"Fuck, Victoria." I pulled her up, wrapping my arms around her. "Relax. I'm here."

Her teeth chattered as she feebly pushed at my shoulders. “Leave me alone!”

Releasing a low growl, I tightened my grip, but she sank her teeth in my shoulder. Surprised at the attack, I let her go.

“Leave me the hell alone. This was what you wanted, wasn’t it?” she asked shakily.

I blew out a breath. The apology was right on my lips, but her impulsive behavior pissed me off. Why would she put herself in danger by venturing into a snowstorm? Who the fuck does that?

Victoria rolled her eyes and dipped for her luggage with a shaking hand, which upset me even more.

“What the fuck are you doing?” I asked.

“Getting as far away from you,” she replied.

“The hell you are,” I growled, lifting her small body in my arms and throwing her over my shoulder. She squealed, her small fists beating against my back, the effect similar to being hit by a beach ball.

“Put me down right now!” she shrieked, kicking too, but it didn’t affect me one bit. “Who do you think you are?”

I grabbed her bags with my free hand and made the rough trek toward home. Throughout the journey, she was like an annoying little parrot in my ear, doing her best to hit me where she assumed would hurt. Useless.

The cold numbed me all over, disregarding the thick coat I wore. I tried to move with speed, but it was a tedious task, considering the weight on my shoulders and in my hand.

Victoria wiggled from my shoulder the instant I stepped inside. I dropped her bags to the floor, bracing for her reaction. It took no time. Her small hand swept through the air with an attempt to slap my face, but I caught her wrist, tightening my grip.

“Don’t.”

“You’re hurting me,” she gritted through her teeth.

“Yeah, like you wanted to hurt me just now, right?”

“We both know you wouldn’t have felt a thing.” She scoffed, jerking her hand away when I released her. “Touch me again, and you’ll regret it, big guy.”

It was barely a threat, considering she was only five feet tall, about one hundred and twenty pounds soaking wet. I ignored her

murmurings, moving to the dying fireplace, shoving a few more pieces of wood into the fire. My peripheral vision caught her moving closer. She positioned herself right at in front of the fireplace, curling herself into a ball as she rubbed her hands together to get warm. I went for a blanket, handing it to her. She hesitated, glaring at it, but her eyes softened as she took it and wrapped it around her.

"Thanks. It's freezing," she said shakily, rocking herself back and forth.

With the fireplace not yet blazing, it would take a while before the room got heated again. I sat beside her, struggling with the urge to wrap her in my arms and warm her up. I ignored it, knowing where it could lead. There was no doubt Victoria and I would have crazy sex. The chemistry was too intense for anything less.

A few minutes passed before she glanced at me. "Sorry you had to come after me. I now realize how stupid I was."

"Yes you were," I replied, shoving my hands toward the heat radiating from the fire.

"I'm also sorry for breaking your family photo. You frightened me, but—"

"Don't worry about it. I'll replace the glass when I'm in town."

"Good." She sighed, tightening the blanket around her. "Look, I'm not the easiest person to deal with, but I'm grateful. Thank you for everything. I'm sure when this is all over I can safely say, you've saved my life more than once." Her gaze lowered to her lap, her face scrunching, making me curious about her thoughts. I didn't want to open a question-and-answer forum. The less Victoria knew about my life, the better.

She slowly lifted her head, returning her gaze to me. My heart dipped in my chest from the softness in her beautiful eyes. I could get lost in them—in her, actually.

Who was I kidding?

I was already falling hard for Victoria. The panic I experienced when I realized she'd left, that wasn't only because of my worry for her safety. It was the fear I'd lost her before even having time to be with her. There was no denying how much wanted to explore every inch of her, how I wanted to make her mine in so many other ways.

It fucking scared me. I had only been in love once—which was a shitshow—but it took time. Rachel and I dated for years before I fell for her. With Victoria, it took two days. It was ridiculous. No way could it be real. But my racing heart contradicted all logic.

I inched closer to Victoria; her pretty, pink lips parting for me. She wanted this. *She wanted me*. I leaned in, pressing my lips to hers, losing myself in her sweet smell, her soft smooth lips and the passion they exuded for me. With my hand gripping a handful of her hair, I deepened the kiss, the heat from her mouth hardening my cock. She reciprocated the same energy, kissing me hard, her tongue tangling with mine, her soft lips roaming over mine. Her sexy moan magnified the arousal that blazed through me. My hands wrapped around her small body, pulling her closer to me.

There was no protest, just pure acceptance as our bodies pressed together. Her fingers gripped the hem of my shirt, my heart racing as she pulled it over my head.

We parted, both breathing hard, but before my shirt hit the floor, she was on me again, desperate for my taste as I was for hers. Her fingers were like fire on my bare skin, melting away the coldness with each caress.

I reached for her top, hauling it over her head. My fingers found the clasp of her bra and I unhooked it, pulling down the straps and exposing her flawless breasts. They stood round and firm; the pink nipples already hard, the sight watering my mouth.

“Perfect,” I murmured, my eyes only leaving them to catch the blush that reddened her cheeks.

Unable to resist any longer, I palmed her breast, gently kneading, watching as her mouth parted with a groan that sent desire rushing through me. I held the other breast, mimicking the motion. They filled my big hands, as if they were made for me.

I took her mouth for another kiss, one she soon broke, her forehead pressed to mine. She swallowed, her soft breaths leaving me on edge. “Is there something wrong?” I asked.

“Before we take another step, there’s something I need to know, Griffin,” she replied, her eyes closed.

This wasn’t where I expected our steamy little encounter to go, but what the hell. “Shoot.”

“This is just a fling, but I need to know; are you seeing someone else? Because I don’t—I can’t sleep with you if there’s another woman in your life.”

I scoffed. “Look around, Victoria. Do you see signs of any woman around?”

She opened her eyes, giving me a hopeful stare. “No wife and kids?”

It was a strange question, but I answered anyway. “No wife and kids.”

A weird look crossed her face before she pressed her lips against mine again. I didn’t have time to consider what it meant, not with her hands at the waistband of my pants. My cock stood on high alert, waiting patiently for her to touch it. She fumbled with the button and I considered that the sweetest thing, but not wanting to stretch it out, I pulled them off.

Victoria’s lips parted, her eyes widening slightly as her eyes swept my body, her gaze lingering at my front. She licked her lips and my cock twitched instantly. She sank to her knees, those innocent brown eyes staring up at me. What I would do to have them wrapped –

“Fuck.”

I sucked in a breath as she gripped my cock. “God, you’re huge,” she said a whisper, the incredulity unmistakable in her voice.

I couldn’t hide my smirk but said nothing. Her small hand moved along my length, gently pumping at first, her gaze still locked with mine. “I hope I’m doing this right,” she mumbled.

“You’re perfect,” I huffed.

She smiled, a soft blush covering her neck and face, her moist palm stroking the shit out of me. I tried to hold back my groans, but it became impossible when she stroked my balls with her free hand. The sounds from my mouth seemed to arouse her even more, for her nipples got even harder. Gradually, her pace increased, matching my fast breathing.

“I want my cock inside that tiny mouth,” I breathed, stroking her cheek.

She peered at me again, pushing a lock of hair behind her ear and closing her mouth over the tip of my cock. I swore, her hot mouth sending an electric charge through me. Her tongue swirled around my head making slow circles that left me digging my toes in the carpet, moaning her name. Fuck, she’d just begun, and I was already falling apart. Impressive, considering how innocent she seemed. I gripped her hair when she took me in her mouth, sucking halfway before coming back up again, my cock glistening with her saliva. Again, she sank down, coming up again, her lips like a suction around me.

“Fuck, that feels amazing, baby,” I whispered. “Don’t fucking stop.”

Victoria wrapped one hand around my ass, the next gently

squeezing my balls as she moved back and forth, the slick sounds of my cock in her mouth making me even harder.

"That's it," I managed through clenched teeth, moving her hair back from her face as she sucked the head once more. "Such a fucking good girl. Take all of me, Victoria."

With a deep moan, she complied, taking my entire length in her mouth. My body jerked from the insurmountable pleasure. It was so fucking hot to watch her head bouncing, taking me in, releasing me, saliva dripping to the floor as she steadily sucked me off. I remained still, holding onto her head as my cock hit the back of her throat. She took it like a fucking champion. I closed my eyes, muttering curse after curse, slowly losing myself. On the verge of my release she pulled back, gagging. Breathing hard, she pumped me with her hand.

"I won't last long if you keep this up," I breathed, as she licked along the base.

Victoria smiled, her lips glazed with saliva and precum. "We can't have that, can we?" she said mischievously, before taking me in her mouth again. I looked to the ceiling with a load moan as I rocked my hips, gently fucking her mouth, my rigid cock gliding like a hot knife through butter.

She held onto my hips, going all the way. All nine inches of my cock in her mouth. Her skin reddened, her eyes watering before she quickly pulled back with a cough, spit draining down her lips. After taking a breath, she took me in her mouth again, this time only halfway, her tiny fist pumping the other half. My balls tightened as my climax approached. Victoria flinched as the first spurts flew to the back of her throat, taking her by surprise, but like the champ she was, she swallowed every single drop, then licked her lips with a satisfied moan.

Holy shit. This woman was something else.

I wasn't in love with her. Not yet. It was way too soon. But as I reached for her, I couldn't deny how close I was.

Chapter 11

Victoria

“Fucking hell, that was… wow,” Griffin breathed, reaching for me. “You’re more than what meets the eye; you know that?”

“That’s a compliment, right?” I reply. The saltiness of his semen still lingered in my mouth and my jaws were tense from sucking him so long. It was so worth it, especially with those sexy curses coming from his mouth. The way he gripped my hair and fucked my mouth… god, my pussy throbbed from the memory.

“Damn right, that was.” He gave me a hard, brief kiss. “It’s my turn to take care of you,” he muttered.

I glanced down at his cock hanging between his thick thighs. He was still hard as steel, as if he hadn’t shot a mouthful of cum in the back of throat moments ago. His strong arms lifted me, and he made an effortless walk to the guest room. He placed me on the bed, clasping my face as he stared into my eyes. “Buckle up, Victoria,” he mumbled. “It’s going to be a rough ride.”

Oh, hell. My pussy clenched so tight it hurt, soaking wet with desperate need for him.

He pulled down my pants and threw them aside. I gasped when he roughly parted my legs, his Adam’s apple bobbing as he caressed me. He shifted my panties, stroking the seam of my sex. I bit back a groan when he slipped two fingers inside me.

“Fuck, you’re dripping wet,” he murmured, his voice husky with lust.

My body ached for him. I couldn’t stand the delay any longer. “Please,” I whispered. “I need you inside me, Griffin.”

He dipped his head towards mine, our lips just mere inches away. “How much do you want me, Victoria?”

I licked my lips, jerking my hips upward. “I’m so turned on I can barely think straight.”

Griffin sighed, easing himself up and hooking his fingers into the waistband of my panties. I held my breath and watched as he pulled them down and over my ankles before he bunched it in his fist and took a hard sniff.

My mouth parted, heat covering my face. I’d never had a man sniff my panties before. It was slightly erotic watching him inhaling

my scent, yet I wanted to hide under the covers.

"You scent is so fucking perfect. Just like you," he said, throwing the panties aside and reaching for me.

He took my mouth for a kiss that short-circuited my brain, erasing my shyness. I moaned, gripping the back of his neck and matching the hard strokes of his tongue. He lowered his warm body to mine, his cock grazing at my pussy, and I deepened the kiss when it brushed my rock-hard clit.

I whimpered when he broke the kiss, then let out a happy sigh as his tongue trailed along my neck. He bit a sensitive spot and my pussy throbbed, aching for him. I rocked my hips as he moved down, leaving a hot, wet trail from my neck, throat and cleavage. I gasped his name when he took my nipple in his mouth, tugging hard. My back arched off the floor as heat flooded my body. My hand raked down his spine, the other trying to move between us to hold his cock.

Griffin moved to the other nipple, nipping like he'd done with the other giving me a perfect mix of pain and pleasure that made me ache for more. My eyes flew open when he pried my thighs further apart, settling between them. His gaze locked with mine, the hunger so clear in his eyes. My body shuddered when he nudged my entrance, so desperate for all of him.

In one swift movement, he pressed deep inside me, filling me, stealing every ounce of my breath. Fuck, he was huge. Seeing his size was one thing, feeling every inch… now, that was something else.

I gripped his thick arms, opening more for him. He pulled back, thrusting again, his eyes filled with an emotion that made my heart flutter. Or maybe I imagined it. No way did he stare at me with love.

No way.

My pussy burned sweetly by the intrusion, stretching to accommodate Griffin's size. My walls hugged him like a long-lost lover each time he pressed inside me. He muttered a curse as he sank deeper and deeper until he was completely buried, and I was latching onto him like a woman starved.

"Fuck, you feel amazing around me," he whispered, stroking me hard and deep, touching my soul.

I whimpered, my eyes rolling to the back of my head as he repeatedly brushed that sensitive spot. "Oh, Griffin…yes…"

"Yes… fucking say my name," he ordered gruffly, his hips circling as he changed the rhythm.

“Griffin!” I screamed as he picked up the pace, making my vision blurry from the rough thrusts. The headboard banged against the wall, matching his fast rhythm. Sweat ran from my body, making me wonder if there really was a snowstorm outside.

Griffin grunted, pushing my legs forward, my knees pressed to my chest. He did warn me about being rough, but when he pressed inside me again, I didn’t imagine it being so brutal.

Yet, so fucking amazing.

With one hand pinning down my arms, he did not let up, fucking me with a fervor, his balls slapping my thighs. I couldn’t think; not that I wanted to. I was content with the blissful haze that surrounded me, thickening with each deep, delicious stroke Griffin gave me.

My body burned from the heat. So did Griffin’s. He was red in the face, his forehead dripping with sweat and his abs glistening under the warm light. I glanced at the fireplace beside us, our shadows reflected on the other side. It wasn’t the heat from the fireplace that made us sweat, but the passion that swirled around us. I didn’t imagine lovemaking being like this.

No. Not lovemaking. This was sex; nothing more.

My pelvic wall tightened. A deep, pleasurable sensation filled my core. On the verge of letting go, my eyes flew open with surprise as Griffin pulled out. Desperate for my release, I reached for him, but he pulled me up and kissed me.

“Wrap your legs around me,” he said almost breathlessly, still positioned on his knees. I did as he asked, wrapping my arms around his neck as well. We kissed, our slick bodies rubbing against each other.

Griffin reached under, and I could feel his hard cock against my pussy before he slipped it in. I sighed, easing myself into him as he filled me once again. Mouth still joined to his, I bounced on his cock, moaning from each burst of pleasure inside me. His huge hands held my waist, keeping me in place as we rode the waves of desire.

Him inside me was the best feeling I’ve had in a while—no, ever. Each passing second was even better than the last. My movements became more frantic as I craved more of his sweet cock and a desperation for an orgasm. My breathing became labored and just then, Griffin held my ass cheeks and began to aid in my movements as he too neared his release.

“O–oh yes! Yes!” I moaned, my nails digging into his skin, the

ache growing more intense.

Griffin grunted and squeezed me while I cried out, tears pricking my eyes as the initial wave of my orgasm swept over me.

"Fuuuuuuck!" I screamed, sinking all the way down then back again in a fast motion that made me dizzy. Griffin growled, wrapping his arms around me, his hips rising to meet my thrusts. He moaned my name as a flood of warmth filled me. At the moment, I didn't mind that he'd cum inside me. I was too caught up in my own release, too blinded by pleasure to care.

My body trembled. I sucked in a breath as my eyes rolled over and the sweetest pleasure rushed through every inch of my body. His name was a constant murmur on my lips as I sank back to earth. From his heavy breathing, I realized he was on his way back, too.

When he finally released me and moved to stoke the fire, I pushed to a sitting position with my knees pressed to my chest, my chin resting on top. I stared at his broad back, wondering what his thoughts were. For some reason, I didn't want regret to be one of them. I hoped he enjoyed this as much as I did. I hoped he wanted more.

More?

This was a onetime thing, wasn't it?

I closed my eyes with a deep breath. Who was I kidding? Griffin saved my life—twice. He gave me a place to stay. He made love to my body with a passion no man had ever done. Did I really want to let this go?

**

The smile wouldn't leave my face as Griffin spooned me, another blanket thrown over us while we curled against each other, still completely naked. My body still buzzed from the incredible sex and I had a feeling it would be for a long time.

"How do you feel?" he asked me, his mouth at my ear, the sensation sending a shiver down my body.

"Like I'm in heaven on earth," I said, then chuckled. "It's corny, I know, but it's the only description that makes sense."

His hold around me tightened as he placed a gentle kiss to my cheeks. "I'm glad you got lost in the snowstorm that night."

I giggled. "The near-death experience aside, I'm glad, too."

“Hungry?” he asked, his hand just under my breast.

I turned to face him, our noses almost touching. “I have something in mind, but I don’t wanna seem greedy,” I replied with a smile.

“In that case, we are both greedy.” He reached for me, giving me a kiss that let me know exactly what he wanted. I wrap my leg around him, grinding my sex against his thigh. With a moan, Griffin pulled away.

“You need something in your stomach if we’re going to keep this up,” he said, sitting up. “I’ll go make us something quick.”

I sat up, watching as he moved around the room completely naked, his cock semi erect. I licked my lips, the blood rushing to my face when he caught me staring. He smirked, hauling on his boxers and heading to the kitchen. With a happy sigh as I got out of bed, deciding to take a shower while Griffin made breakfast. There was still an ache between my thighs. I still wanted him. If we continued like this, there was a high chance I wouldn’t even be able to walk tomorrow. I chuckled, not minding one bit. For once, I didn’t think about my job, or the story, or even Ashley and home. I felt free. I wanted this feeling always.

I stepped under the warm shower, closing my eyes as the water blasted against my skin. I couldn’t help but smile as I thought of the last three days. Griffin finding me in the snow, being an asshole to me at first, then transforming into a soft, caring man when I got injured. Our little fights that ended when I stormed out of his house, him coming back to save me, our sheet-gripping lovemaking… who knew I would fall for someone so soon?

The smile disappeared as I washed the soap from my body. There was no denying my feelings for Griffin. The problem was, I couldn’t tell him. The minute he learned what I did for a living, the instant he would connect the dots. He was a smart man. I missed my window. Maybe if I’d been honest from the start…

With a weary sigh, I left the stall and brushed my teeth before I pulled on another jumpsuit and walked to the kitchen where Griffin was, cooking something that reminded me of dinner with my mom. I leaned against the counter watching him, not wanting to get used to the bliss that surrounded me. This was only temporary. As soon as I got my story, I’d take the next flight out. No looking back.

Which meant, I needed to get to work. After three days, I still had nothing, not even a draft.

“I hope you like pasta,” Griffin said as he stirred the pot.

“I do, it smells wonderful,” I replied. “Do you want me to set the table?”

He turned and smiled at me as if I just offered him a million dollars. “I’d like that. Thank you.”

Twenty minutes later, we’d taken our seats around the small table in the kitchen, two plates of steaming, creamy pasta in front of us. I didn’t waste anytime in digging in. Thirty minutes in Griffin’s bed had reduced me to a starving animal. I took the first bite, unable to hold back my moan as a burst of flavor hit my taste buds.

“Where did you learn to cook like this?” I asked, pausing to look at him.

“YouTube.”

My brows shot up. “And here I was thinking you were going to mention your mom.”

He shook his head. “My mom was hardly around.”

“Your parents didn’t get along?”

“Not quite. Their marriage was more for convenience than love, I suppose.”

“That must have sucked as a kid.”

“Not really,” he said as he cleared his throat and glanced at me. “You mentioned your mom being a single parent, but do you have any siblings, Victoria?”

I shook my head. “I’m an only child, although I consider Ashley my sister.” I push the fork around the plate, considering my next move. “So… where did you grow up?”

“LA,” he said, taking a sip of water.

“That’s miles away from here. What brought you to Alaska?” I quickly asked.

Griffin looked back to his plate, placing his fork down as if he’d suddenly lost his appetite. “The need for change, I guess.”

“Oh, come on. That’s the vaguest response I’ve ever heard. What made you want a change?”

A dark cloud passed over his face. He pushed the plate away. “My wife.”

My fork dropped to the plate. “You’re married?”

He scoffed. “Wipe that shock off your face, Victoria. Rachel and I are divorced. We wouldn’t have made love if I was still a married

man."

Hearing him say the word 'love' jumbled the thoughts in my head and I forgot what I wanted to say. I gaped at him until he scoffed again. "We're divorced, Victoria."

I bit my lips. "What happened?"

There was a slight pause as if he debated whether to tell me the truth. I kept my fingers crossed, hoping he wouldn't hold back. I needed this story. Not only to save my job, but to get me out of Anchorage. Snowstorm or not, my time with Griffin had to end before I fell deeper.

Griffin sighed, turning his gaze to me. "Rachel and I were married for five years, during which we tried having a baby. Nothing worked. We spent thousands of dollars on fertility specialists who all told us we were both perfectly healthy. I didn't understand why she couldn't get pregnant after trying for so long. Three years later, I found her birth control pills. She didn't want kids—at least, not yet, but she didn't have the guts to tell me. It almost ripped me apart, but I agreed to save our marriage.

"Back then, my best friend Elliott managed my business. I didn't have time to market my books and handle my finances. I just wanted to write. Rachel got pregnant around the time I found out Elliott had made off with every dollar from my savings account. Five hundred thousand, to be exact. It almost ruined me. Our baby on the way was my only saving grace. Rachel and I tried to make our marriage work—at least, I did, but I sensed her drifting away. I put it down to her hormones from the pregnancy, although my instincts said otherwise.

"Two weeks before her due date, she confessed that the baby wasn't mine. It was Elliott's. She had been biding her time before packing up and moving to be with him."

I gasped, covering my mouth. Out of all the stories I'd expected to hear, this surpassed them all. "Oh, my, Griffin. I'm so sorry."

He cleared his throat. "I still didn't believe her, but when the baby was born, I got a DNA test done and that confirmed it."

His face crumpled with the memories of that pain, the tears filled his eyes, balancing on the rim. I wanted to hug him so much, but I didn't dare, fearing he would lose it. "As if that didn't destroy me enough, I found out she and Elliott conspired to steal my money. They'd been seeing other since the first year of our marriage."

"Christ." I palm my cheeks, staring wide-eyed at him.

"She gave a stupid excuse about me being too busy, as it that

justified her deceiving and stealing from me all those years. For the baby's sake, I didn't press charges. We divorced, and as a condition to our agreement, she didn't request spousal support, and she gave up rights to half of my assets. I moved here to clear my head – to get away from all the toxicity. Last I heard, she and the baby are living in the Maldives with Elliott. There's no extradition to the US, not did I care. They were all dead to me."

I swallowed the lump in my throat. "I'm so sorry, Griffin. You didn't deserve that."

He nodded, wiping his face. "A few days ago, you would've said the opposite, though."

The glimmer of a smile and his teasing tone made me chuckle. "You're probably right. You were such an asshole to me."

His smile faded. "You're right. I wasn't as welcoming when you got here, and I'm sorry for that. I'm glad you're here, Victoria. Truly."

My heart lurched in my chest as he rose from his seat, coming around to kneel at my feet. "Let me show you how glad I am."

He captured my lips with his own, kissing me with such passion, triggering my tears. Guilt ate at me. I now had the story I came for, which meant my job was now secure. But could I ruin Griffin's life by exposing his past?

The snowstorm still raged outside, so I would sleep on it a bit. Until then, I wanted to enjoy him. It would be the last time, anyway.

With my arms looped around his neck, I returned his kiss with the same urgency, my need for him moving in waves over my body. He pulled the zipper of my jumpsuit, peeling it over my shoulder and I hurriedly pulled my arms through, raising my butt for him to slip it down my lower half. I pulled down his shorts, gripping his cock before he even stepped from it. He hissed as I stroked him, the harsh sounds fueling my arousal, making me want to skip the foreplay.

He spun me around, pressing his hard body to mine. I bit my lips as he kneaded my breasts. His coarse hands grazed my soft skin, the contrast arousing me even more than his actions. He ran his fingers down my back, following with sweet kisses that made me tingle all over, begging him to fuck me.

With a deep growl, he bent me over, his cock grazing my ass, his rough breaths letting me know how much he wanted me. My pussy tightened with anticipation, eagerly waiting for him to spear me.

Imagine my surprise when he licked me instead. I gripped the edge of the table, sucking in a breath as his tongue stroked the seam

of my pussy, lapping my clit before making its way back, then repeating the motion.

"Fuck, Griffin… I love what you're doing to me right now."

He moaned in response, the vibration making me rock my hips, rubbing myself over his mouth. His beard tickled my thighs, riling me up. I rocked faster, moaning his name when his tongue slipped inside me, tasting how ready I was for him.

Before I fell apart from the onslaught of his tongue, he withdrew, spreading my legs even more, pressing inside me with a loud grunt. My walls clamped around him, my juices flowing even more. I reached out to steady myself on the counter, slightly arching my back as his hands roamed over my sensitive breasts and across my stomach. He filled me with hard stabs, each one punctuated and hitting my sweet spot.

"Oh yes! Griffin. Don't stop. You feel like heaven inside me…"

My knees buckled and I moaned when he pulled me back up, pressing me on the table as he stroked me harder from behind. His fingers moved against my sensitive clit, making me shiver. I grip the edges of the table tighter as shockwaves of pleasure ran through me. He continued to rub my clit as he fucked me, his pace increasing with each stroke. I whimpered as the urge to pee came with full force.

"Grif–" I managed, unable to get the word out.

He didn't let up and I couldn't find it within me to utter another word, not with ecstasy dancing through my body. I screamed as a warm spray of liquid shot out from me, running down my thighs.

"Fucking hell!" Griffin breathed, amazement in his voice. He still didn't let up, fucking me like a thoroughbred on steroids.

My knees buckled. Just when I thought I'd fall to the floor, Griffin held me up, his grip tightening on me as he climaxed with deep grunts.

Completely drained and trapped in bliss, I could only register Griffin picking me up and carrying me to his bedroom. I curled up in a fetal position, my body humming from the aftershocks of my pleasure. Griffin's kiss on my forehead made me smile. I hugged the pillows as his footsteps receded to the bedroom.

He returned a minute later with a washcloth, parting my legs as he cleaned me. I shuddered when he brushed my sensitive clit, but I didn't resist. The last thing I heard was the shower running before I fell asleep.

Chapter 12

Griffin

Victoria had been asleep for a few hours now, but I still couldn't take my eyes off her. Her face was the perfect picture of peace – beauty like I'd never seen before. Her brown hair flowed behind her, a few tendrils loose and over her shoulders, caressing her naked breasts, those nipples still erect even in sleep. Every inch of her was perfect and it made me wonder why she was still single. Why I'd been so lucky for her to fall right into my lap—well, on my roadway.

Surely, this was a co-incidence, right?

For a man short on luck, I could only hope this was a time for my well-needed break. I didn't understand how I'd fallen for a woman so fast, but I accepted it as life rewarding me for being patient all these years. For the first time since Rachel's deception, I had no resentment – it was like the weight of the world had fallen off my shoulders.

Victoria shifted her position with a gentle snore that made me smile. This felt right; her falling asleep next to me, my sheets hugging her nakedness, contentment on her face. There was an urgent need to hide her away, where only I could see her. She was like a treasure only I had the privilege to touch.

Again, Victoria turned, the action shifting the sheet and exposing her breasts. My cock stirred. Not that it needed much effort. Just looking at her made me want to bury myself inside her again. She made me insatiable. Borderline obsessed. She was so deep under my skin, I'd never get enough.

However, she needed rest, so I allowed her to sleep while I considered the future. There was no certainty about our relationship once the snowstorm ended. The bliss from sex would finally wane—at least, for her—and she could return to New York without a relationship with me.

Or, maybe she wanted the same thing I did. Maybe she wanted to see where we could take this fling, despite how scary and uncertain it was.

The maybe's left me confused. After keeping my heart secure for

so long, was I willing to give it to another woman I barely knew?

I threw my head against a pillow with a sigh, loving the way Victoria made me feel, but hating it at the same time. The thought of being with her made me oppose every decision I made seven years ago.

Victoria shuffled in the bed, moaning softly as she turned to face me, a smile on her face. “Hey, you,” she said, voice groggy with sleep, the sexiest thing I’d heard in a while.

“You slept well,” I smirked.

“The effects of having sex with a stallion, I guess. Another round like that and you’ll put me in a coma for sure.”

I chuckled. “Sounds like a challenge.”

She blushed. “I might be tempted.”

I reached for her hand and allowed her to feel my hard cock. “Have your say.”

Her mouth fell open as she jerked her hand away. “You’re insatiable.”

“I can’t get enough of you,” I muttered, taking her mouth for a kiss that showed her exactly what I meant. She moaned, shuffling closer to me, throwing her leg over my hip. My hand trailed down her back and to her ass where I held her in place before inserting my cock. She was still wet, allowing me a slick entry as I breached her.

Her tight little pussy hugged me. I bared my teeth, shoving myself all the way. She gasped, her breath fanning against my mouth as I fucked her. Unable to resist her pouty lips, I kissed her, filling her with long tender strokes, her pussy smooth as velvet and as warm as a fire pit. There was no way I could last long inside her. Not like this.

Switching position, I rolled on top of her, using my knees to part her legs then I entered her again. She moaned, her head thrashing to each side, her fingers gripping the sheets as she urged me to go faster. I complied, my hips zipping, my cock drilling her sweet heat.

“Griffin please...”

“Tell me what you want, baby, and I’ll gladly oblige.”

“I want– I want your cum inside me,” she whispered, her mouth at my ear.

My cock swelled inside her, the words making me want to explode, but it wasn’t time. I wanted to watch her fall apart when I made her come. I withdrew, sucking her nipples, my mouth moving

along her stomach, down to the slick flesh between her thighs, feathering her skin with kisses as her moans vibrated through her.

"Oh God," she whimpered when I slipped two fingers inside her.

I swiveled my tongue across her flesh, lapping at her juices and enjoying the moans that left her mouth, her quivering thighs telling me her release wasn't too far away. I licked her up and down, scouring her tightness with my tongue before I sucked her clit.

"Holy, shit. I fucking love your mouth." Victoria's fingers found my hair, raking through the roots while I sucked her clit even harder, her taste fresh and sweet and incredibly addicting. Her thighs closed in on my head, squeezing tight.

She was almost there.

I pulled back, trying not to chuckle as she swore.

The curses died on her lips as I positioned myself between her legs again, slowly inching inside her, the wetness, the heat, and tightness too unbearable. My balls smacked her ass as I fucked her, juices flowing from her cunt, the sounds echoing in the room as I drove back and forth through her.

Her climax arrived, accompanied by her sharp nails digging into my skin, her pussy tightening around me, her lips screaming my name. She kissed me; hot and rough, moaning when she tasted herself on my lips.

"Fuck, Griffin," she whispered after pulling back. "What are you doing to me?"

"The same fucking thing you're doing to me," I muttered. "Driving me insane."

Victoria closed her eyes with a soft gasp when I thrusted hard, riding out my climax. Finally drained, I rolled to the side, the sounds of our harsh breathing filling the room. I couldn't remember ever sweating like this, nor could I recall ever being so content. It was the craziest thing, but she made me complete.

I turned to face her, confused by the tears pooling in her eyes. We had the most amazing sex just now, didn't we?

I brushed her hair aside, cupping her cheek. She shifted her gaze as the first streak broke free, running in a sad, slow flow.

My heart lurched as I wiped the tear away. "Are you okay?"

She nodded. "Yeah… perfect."

"Are you sure? Because those are real tears, Victoria."

Again, she nodded, surprising me by straddling me, taking my cock. “Make love to me again, Griffin.”

I groaned as she stroked me, getting me rock hard within minutes. I lifted her hips, impaling her with my cock, waves of pleasure flooding me with each delicious thrust. Victoria came with me in mind-numbing climax that left me empty, yet, still craving more of her. There was no word to explain it; just the most insane thing I’d ever experienced in my life.

Victoria rolled off and turned her back to me, her heavy breaths matching my own. I heard a soft sob, then another. Alarmed, I pulled her into my warms, wiping the tears from her face.

“What’s going on, Victoria?”

She opened her mouth and I gripped her shoulders. “Don’t lie to me, please.”

She sighed. “There’s something I have to tell you, Griffin.”

“Okay…” My curious mind tried to think of a reason she would cry like this, but I came up with nothing.

Her mouth opened and closed, but no words came out.

“Hey, whatever it is, you can tell me. Look, we haven’t known each other for long, but I care about you.”

“Oh, God,” she whispered, her eyes welling with tears once more. “Griffin, I care about you too. But—”

My cell phone rang, cutting her words short. I frowned at seeing Kourtney’s name on the screen. My sister never called unless there was an emergency. Raising a finger to Victoria, I swiped the screen. “Kourt?”

Her distorted voice came back at me. I moved away, trying to find a spot in the room for a decent signal. The call ended abruptly, so I tried calling back. The ‘no signal’ beep sounded in my ear, and I returned the phone to the side table while making a mental reminder to call her tomorrow.

“Now, what were you saying?” I asked Victoria when I returned to her. The tears were now gone; in its place was guarded smile.

She shook her head. “It’s not important. Not anymore.”

“Victoria, you were crying a few minutes ago. Whatever bothers you is important to me.”

“I was just caught up in the post-sex emotions, that’s all.” She suddenly grinned. “I’m gonna go take a shower; want to join me?”

Her obvious attempt to sidestep the question didn't disturb me. I expected she would open up when it suited her.

She ran her fingers through her long hair, letting it fall in waves as she walked toward the bathroom, her hips swinging as she went. "Are you going to join me, or not?"

She giggled and squealed when I caught up to her and scooped her up in my arms, carrying her to the bathroom. We simply showered, too exhausted to do anything else. When I snuggled next to her in bed, my only thought was on figuring how to make her stay.

**

The following morning, I woke up to Victoria nestled beside me, her ass cushioned right in my crotch and my cock as hard as a rock against her. She was still sound asleep. I smiled, loving the idea of waking up next to her, inhaling her scent and feeling her soft skin against mine.

But that was short lived when my phone rang and she twisted and turned, her eyes fluttering open. I kissed her softly on the lips before I reached for the phone that stopped ringing as soon as I reached for it.

"Seems like the signal is back."

She sat up, stretching. "Great, I'm going to take a shower while you return your call."

I smiled and kissed her before watching her leave. I checked my phone. It was Kourtney again, reminding me of last night's call.

She answered on the first ring. "God. Why is it always a struggle to reach you?" she exclaimed.

"You know what the service is like up here. Is everything okay?"

"Yeah, I saw the news about the terrible snowstorm. I wanted to see if you're okay."

I moved toward the window and drew the curtains, barely able to see anything but enough to know the storm had ended. "Yes, I'm fine. I told you to stop worrying about me."

"You're my little brother; that's impossible."

I scoffed. Kourtney knew I disliked that reference, especially since we're only a year apart. "How are you?"

"I'm doing great. I already met my target for this month, so I've taken a few days off."

"Good for you. Which means you need to get off the phone and enjoy your break."

Kourtney chuckled. "Listen, I forgot to mention, and it's probably too late now, but a girl came by the house a few days ago – she wanted to talk to you…"

My brows furrowed. "A girl?"

"Yeah, said she was a journalist and wanted to hear your story. You're still blowing up here by the way."

I swallowed. "What did you tell her?"

There was a small silence. "She seemed pretty desperate; said her job was on the line and she just wanted to interview you. So, I gave her your address—"

"You did what?"

"I'm sorry I overstepped, Griff, I just felt sorry for her—"

"Kourt, you promised to keep my whereabouts a secret. Do you know how embarrassing it would be if my story gets out?"

Just the thought of some journalist invading my space, wanting to dig in my past made me want to punch a hole in the wall. Why couldn't people mind their own business? What the hell was so fascinating about me?

In the shower, Victoria hit a high note, her happy tone clashing with my fury and winning, which calmed me down. I took a deep breath, unable to help my smile. It still amazed me that after three days, she affected me so much.

Wait a minute.

My smile faded as the wheels turned in my brain. What were the odds that Victoria showed up, but the journalist didn't? What if they were one and the same?

No. It couldn't be. Victoria wouldn't lie to me.

"Are you still there, Griff?"

"What was her name?" I asked, my mind running a mile a second. This couldn't be happening. *Please let me be wrong.*

"I don't remember her name but—"

"What did she look like?" I cut in.

“Brunette… er – stunning, with the most beautiful brown eyes. A tiny little thing, too. Ahh… I think her name was Viv– Victoria!”

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

I gripped the phone so tight, I thought it would’ve crumpled in my hands. I didn’t want to believe Victoria had deceived me, but it all added up. I gritted my teeth as the fury resurfaced, burning a hole in my heart.

“Griff, say something, please.”

“I’ll call you back, Kourt.” I hung up the phone and threw it on the bed, pacing the bedroom floor.

How could I have been so fucking stupid? How could I not have figured a young, beautiful city girl wouldn’t have booked a vacation in the middle of nowhere. How could I not assume that with all the buzz on the internet, someone her age would definitely know who I was. Fuck, I was so captivated by her, so blinded by my lust. She was a fucking woman; why did I expect anything less? What made Victoria any different from Rachel? Nothing.

This was her endgame from the moment she arrived; to seduce me, get my story, and sell it the highest bidder. Like an idiot, I walked right into her trap. Now that she’d gotten what she came for, I suspected she’d be out of here in no time.

A crippling ache made me clutch my chest, taking deep breaths to get rid of the pain. I dropped to my knees, grabbing onto the bed as I tried to get myself under control. I considered confronting her for the truth, but a part of me wanted revenge; to hurt her as much as she hurt me. I had no issues with pretending a little longer, just to fuck with her head.

Yes, that was exactly what I would do.

Chapter 13

Victoria

"Oh, my God. You slept with Griffin Holt?" Ashley exclaimed on the other end of the phone.

Glancing at the half-opened door of my room, I quickly scampered off my bed and closed it. After breakfast—a quiet one, where Griffin's mind seemed miles away—he'd left to work in his office. I thought it strange he'd barely said a word to me. In fact, his replies were mostly grunting and a few head shakes. Maybe the novelty had worn off and he regretted sleeping with me.

But, why did he confess to caring about me?

"Vicky?"

"Yes, I slept with him, Ash," I whispered. "Don't judge me, please."

"As if." I imagined her rolling her eyes. "But how did it happen, though? I thought you wanted to keep things professional."

I groaned. "Yes, that was the plan, but I don't know… there is this chemistry that made it hard to resist. It just… happened."

"Well, coming from a girl who'd done more one-night stands than I can count, there's no judgement here, sweetie. Unless he was terrible in bed. Was he?"

"Not even in the slightest," I reply, chuckling. "Let's just say, I've lost count of how many times my eyes rolled to the back of my head."

"Oh, my God," Ashley whines. "I'm so jealous right now. Tell me more!"

"Nuh-uh. You know I don't kiss and tell."

"Boo! You're no fun."

"I thought we already established you're the fun one," I reply.

"Flattery will get you nowhere, missy. Come on, spill the juicy details."

"My lips are sealed, Ash. Ask me something else, because I'm done talking about that."

"How did Griffin react when you told him who you are?"

I closed my eyes, my heart dropping to the floor of my stomach. “I didn’t tell him.”

“OMG. Victoria!”

“I was going to. Trust me, but then I chickened out.” A blew out a frustrated breath, sending a loose hair flying. “Don’t ride my ass for this, Ash. I already feel bad enough as it is.”

“Did he tell you his story?” she asked.

“Yes, he did—”

“Jesus.”

“But I’m not going to break it, I promise. He’s been through a lot, Ash. I can’t give you details, but his wife—ex-wife is alive and well. So is the baby.”

“Well, thank God for that. You need to tell him the truth, though. Something tells me what happened between you guys was more than sex.”

“Why would you think that?”

“Because you don’t do casual sex, Vic. You don’t sleep with a guy unless you have deep feelings for him.”

I groaned, dragging my palm over my face.

“Tell. Him,” Ashley ordered in her no-nonsense voice.

“I will, but he’s going to hate me, Ash. I just know it.”

There was a small silence. “Listen, Vic. You made a mistake. If he cares about you, he’ll understand. If not, you still have me. I’ll be here waiting with a tub of rocky road ice cream and a bottle of red wine.”

I sighed. “I appreciate you, Ash. God knows what I’d do without you.”

Ashley chuckled. “I love you too. Now, hurry and get back to LA. I won’t stop until you give me all the nasty, juicy details.”

I bid her goodbye, sighing heavily as I fell against the pillows, mulling over Ashley’s advice. I must have fallen asleep, because when I opened my eyes, it seemed a little darker outside. Getting out of bed, I got dressed in a sweater and a pair of thick leggings. As I opened the room door, I heard knocking outside. With a frown, I searched the house for Griffin, but there was no sign of him around. The knocking came loudest from the back door, so I opened it and found him chopping logs with an axe, dressed in only a pair of sweatpants and a tank top while his muscles bulged with each movement he made.

For a moment, I forgot my dilemma and took him in, totally lusting over how delicious he looked with his thick hair hanging loosely over his shoulders. I'd never been obsessed with a man, but Griffin made it easy. I could stare at him like this all day.

It had stopped snowing, but the temperature still danced around the low twenties. I couldn't wrap my head around him standing out there, inappropriately dressed—as much as I enjoyed the view.

"Are you looking to freeze to death?" I exclaimed, when he paused for a moment.

Griffin briefly glanced at me before reaching for another log, placing it on the stump and splitting it in two with one swing of the axe. Once done, he bunched the pile under his arms and with the axe on his shoulder, he came toward me. I stepped aside, realizing he didn't intend to stop, and he brushed past me.

"Are you okay?" I asked, reaching for him. He flinched as if he'd been slapped, leaving me more concerned. "Griffin? What's wrong?"

He hesitated, his mouth moving like he had something to say. A beat passed before he murmured, "Nothing. I'm fine."

But I could see in his eyes that he wasn't.

I followed him inside, waiting for him to discard the logs and axe. As soon as he released them, I reached up to him and kissed him softly, feeling some resistance before he melted into me and kissed me with as much passion as I gave. But I realized he was a bit rougher this time – rougher than usual. His grip on me was almost painful, the hard strokes of his tongue leaving my mouth numb.

This wasn't passion, this was… anger.

I pulled away, staring up at him. "Are *we* okay?" I asked.

"Why wouldn't we be?" he asked gruffly, gripping a handful of my hair and pulling my head back, nibbling my throat. "I just want to be inside you."

The husky words made my pussy throb, ready to give him what he wanted. I surrendered, allowing him to back me to the handle of the sofa, only stopping when my legs hit the furniture.

"Turn around," he ordered, and I did just that while he stood behind me.

I gasped when he yanked down my pants and panties to my ankles, my bottom half completely naked. He traced a finger along the seam of my pussy, feeling how wet I already was. I moaned when I heard him suck his finger off. My heartbeat raced, excited for what we

were about to do.

Griffin pressed his palm into my back and made me bend over the arm of the couch. I looked over my shoulder and saw him pull down his pants, his hard cock springing from its restraint. I licked my lips as he stroked himself, envying his palm, aching to have him inside me. His eyes narrowed, anger flashing within them before he pressed down my back, making me facepalm the seat of the couch.

I sucked in a breath when Griffin roughly entered me. I instantly tightened around him as he buried his entire length. Before I got used to the sensation of being full, he withdrew again, then thrusted so hard I saw stars.

"Griffin—"

He whacked my ass, making me gasp with surprise. It stung like hell, but it aroused me, too. I breathed a moan when he slapped me again, and again, his cock stroking the shit out of me. My pussy pulsed around him, ecstasy filling my insides. I was already coming, and we'd barely just begun.

"Oh, Griffin, I'm coming—"

He suddenly withdrew, bursting the pleasure bubbles inside me. I twisted to peer up at him, the anger on his face confusing me. "Are you okay—"

My words got cut short when he lifted me, carrying me to the dining table where he spread my thighs, lashing me with his thick tongue. Confusion disappeared. Passion took over. I push myself up on my elbows, watching his tongue disappear inside me, feeling its sensation along my walls. He slowly circled it, then switched to a spearing motion, bringing me closer to the edge. He flicked my clit with his thumb; once, twice, repeatedly, applying more pressure each time. I gripped the roots of his hair with a whimper, bracing myself for an outstanding release.

It didn't come. Again, Griffin left me in the cold.

"What the fuck are you doing to me?" I whispered when he lifted me again.

He grunted in reply, fury still dancing in his eyes as he brought me to the carpet, positioning me on all fours, then pressing my upper half to the floor. With my ass in the air, my thighs spread, I waited for him to take me again. It wasn't long before he breached me, plunging harder than ever before.

Pleasure-pain rocked my body. I didn't care about the pain. I focused on the pleasure, my fingers digging into the carpet as I tried

to stay in place. There wasn't an ounce of gentleness about him; not from the way he gripped my waist as he *fucked* me, definitely not from the deep growls that accompanied each vicious stroke. For some reason, I welcomed it. Maybe it was from knowing I would be leaving soon. I didn't want his lovemaking,; nothing that would make me too emotional. This was an impersonal fucking, something to tide me over until I craved my next fix.

Griffin pulled his cock out, my cunt squeezing at the emptiness. Harsh breaths left my mouth as he grazed it along my clit, sending ripples of pleasure through me. I felt the first wave of my climax as he slipped it in again, going all the way.

When I thought he couldn't fuck me any rougher, he proved me wrong. With one heel pressed to the carpet, he palmed my breasts, his thumbs and index fingers gripping each nipple. A loud rumble came from his throat as he drilled me with deep, deliberate strokes, blurring my vision.

"Yes, Griffin! Oh… yes!" I screamed, delirious from the pleasure coursing through me.

My shrieks were like adding gasoline to a fire. Griffin grunted, sweat running from his body onto my back as he grinded into me. I came hard, my knees buckling as I rose to my high, then sank back to earth with a crash. Still, Griffin didn't let up. He slapped my ass, delivering stinging pain after stinging pain until he growled, pulling out of me. His hot cum shot out on my ass, running in slow motion down my crack. He slapped his cock against my cheeks, emptying himself.

With my face still pressed to the carpet, I heard his pants zipper. Surprised, I pulled myself up just in time to see him heading out.

"I'll be in my office," was all he said before disappearing down the hall.

My cheeks burned with embarrassment from his sudden dismissal. Wiping the sweat from my face, I pulled up my panties, shimmied out of my pants and walked to the bathroom, unable to ignore the slickness between my legs.

After running a bath, I removed my clothes and slipped in, acknowledging how sore I already was. Griffin wasn't a gentle lover, but this surpassed how rough he usually was with me. There was something wrong with him; I just couldn't figure out what it was.

Was he back to being cold and closed off?

Did he really care about me like he claimed?

Should I let it bother me? The snowstorm had ended. By tomorrow, the roads would be clear enough for me to leave—hopefully. I could be on a flight to LA by tomorrow night, these last four days forgotten.

I blew out a loud breath, fanning the soap bubbles, misery taking over. Who was I kidding? Griffin had already left his mark on me. I would never forget him.

Done with my bath, I made myself a sandwich and considered making one for Griffin, but he was still locked in his office. The last thing I wanted to do was piss him off again– for whatever reason. I went to bed still miserable, a stark contrast to the previous night. I wasn't wrapped in Griffin's arms this time, nor was I on cloud nine. The blankets weren't warm enough to compensate the cold shower Griffin gave me.

***

After a miserable, sleep-challenged night, I woke up, bleary-eyed and grumpy, ready to confront Griffin about our issues. I found him in the kitchen pouring a cup of coffee. Except for the small tick in his jaw, he didn't acknowledge my presence.

"Good morning."

Nothing.

A frustrated sigh pushed me forward. "Griffin. Please, talk to me. Is everything okay between us?" I asked.

He shrugged, still not looking at me. "Why wouldn't it be?"

"Because you've been acting pissed off since yesterday!" I snapped, even more frustrated by his feigned nonchalance.

A sudden honking outside made me jump. I glanced at the closed window, wondering what it could be. Griffin seemed unaffected, like he already knew what it was. I moved to the window and peeked through. A snow truck pulled up behind Griffin's truck in the driveway. The driver, a middle-aged, white-bearded man with friendly eyes, leaned his head out the window while honking the horn again.

"What's going on?" I asked, turning back to Griffin.

He finally met my eyes, his gaze as cold as any blizzard. "That's my neighbor, Andy, the owner of the Airbnb you'd booked for your trip."

"Oh… okay." I hoped my face gave nothing away. "Why is he here?"

“To take you to the airport,” Griffin simply replied, his icy gaze still locked on me.

Shockwaves ran over me, numbing my entire body. “What?”

“I figured you might be in a rush to get back to *LA* and publish my story. That’s what journalists do, isn’t it?” he asked, his tone as hard as his face.

The room swayed. I gripped the back of the chair for support, connecting the dots. He knew. He’d known all along. The rough sex last night, that was his punishment for my lies.

I stepped to him, reaching for his arm. “Griffin–”

He backed away. The disgust on his face made my stomach drop. “I don’t want to hear it. Pack your fucking bags and leave right now.”

The tears spilled from my eyes. “I was going to tell you—”

“When? After you wrote your story?” he roared. “I took you into my home, I save you from fucking death—twice— and all this time, you’ve been lying to me!”

“I didn’t lie,” I tried to defend, feeling weak.

He rose a brow. “Really? Airbnb up top; was that where you were really headed?”

I couldn’t answer. He wouldn’t believe the half-truth, anyway. My heart broke into pieces, damaged by a self-inflicted wound.

Griffin scoffed. “Thanks for further proving why I can’t trust women anymore.”

Tears flowed down my face, making it hard to see. “I’m sorry!” I choked. “But after hearing your story, there was no way I could write it. Believe me, Griffin. Please.”

“Believe you?” He laughed dryly. “You came in here, lied and gave yourself to me because you wanted me to open up. Like a fool, I fell for it. I don’t believe you wouldn’t publish that story, Victoria. Not after all the trouble you went through to get it.”

“I didn’t tell you who I was, because I didn’t want you to kick me out when you heard I was a journalist.”

“But I’m sure you figured you’d get the information one way or another,” he spat.

My gaze lowered to the floor, a single drop of tears falling to the hardwood. “I didn’t plan on having sex with you, Griffin. And I didn’t sleep with you because I was desperate for a story. I did it

because I—”

“The truck’s waiting. You can head to the airport or the city; doesn’t matter. As long as you’re anywhere but here,” he said firmly, and my heart swelled painfully in my chest– more painful than I’d ever experienced in my life.

With tears still running down my face, I turned and left for the bedroom where I packed my things hastily– desperate to get away, though at the same time, it was the last thing I wanted to do. Griffin wouldn’t see reason – not when he was this angry and I couldn’t even blame him. I brought this on myself. This was the consequence for my stupid actions.

If only he’d believe I didn’t sleep with him for a story. I did that solely because I wanted him. It hurt like hell to see the look on his face – to know I was the reason for his pain. After what Rachel had done to him—God, I never wanted him to experience that betrayal again.

I wiped my tears as I cleared the phlegm from my throat and left the room, taking one last glance at the folded blankets Griffin had lent me – the ones we were wrapped in not too long ago.

I squinted back the fresh tears and prepared myself for Griffin in the living room, but he wasn’t anywhere in sight. Realizing his intention, and with my heart breaking even more, I left, knowing this fight was the last conversation we would ever share.

Chapter 14

Victoria

“Hey, sweetie. Are you awake?”

I groaned, pulling the sheet over my head. “No,” I reply to Ashley.

The bed dipped as she joined me, and fresh air hit my face when she pulled the sheet off my head. “It’s been three days, Vicky. It’s time to leave this goddamn bed.”

“But I don’t want to,” I whined, rubbing my burning eyes. After three days of crying, I doubted there were any tears left in me. My dry mouth was a sign of how dehydrated I was.

After a miserable journey from Griffin’s cabin, during which I prayed he would come after me and beg me to stay, I booked a flight to LA, crying all the way home, falling into Ashley’s arms with more tears as I sobbed out what happened between us. She tried to comfort me but couldn’t, so she went for reinforcements. But rocky road ice cream and red wine weren’t enough to mend my broken heart. Three days later and here I was, still dying inside.

“I’m done with watching you wallow, Vicky. Get out of bed, take a shower and get ready to move on. It’s not the end of the world,” Ashley said.

“Then why does it feel like it is?” I asked, my eyes welling up with fresh tears. Guess I wasn’t as dehydrated as I thought.

Ashley sighed, staring at me with pity. “Shit, you love this man, don’t you?”

I shook my head. “Don’t be ridiculous.”

“Vicky, you’ve never been in love before; I don’t think you have the slightest idea what it feels like, but I’m telling you, your actions tell a different story.”

“I’m just ashamed of how things went down. Griffin deserved better,” I replied, sniffing.

“And you need to stop beating yourself over it. You apologized to him and you told your truth. If he can’t forgive you, then I guess that’s his problem.”

I bit my lips, not wanting to think about Griffin anymore, not when it made me cry so much. “What am I going to tell Pearson?” I whispered. I still had four more vacation days left. He assumed I was

still chasing that lead.

Ashley shrugged. “Tell him there’s no story; simple.”

“But I’ll lose my job,” I reminded her.

“Nah. I think Pearson was just bluffing. He’d be a fool to let you go.”

I disagreed, shaking my head. “I don’t know, Ash. He seemed pretty serious.”

“Well, even if he does, you’ll find another job. There are plenty of openings in the city.”

“But journalism is my dream job,” I pointed out.

“Yes, your dream job; but Grapevine Buzz wasn’t your dream workplace.

“It kinda was –”

Ashley threw her hands up, visibly frustrated. “Okay stop! And stop feeling sorry for yourself. Things will be fine.” I pouted, and she took my shoulders, shaking me a little. “You will be fine, Victoria Danvers.”

Ashley only used my full name when she wanted to get a point across. I pursed my lips, breathing a sigh through my nose.

“It’s hard to believe that right now but trust me, if Pearson fires you, you’ll find a new job. And don’t worry about Griffin. It’s his loss. Mr. Right is still out there waiting for you.”

I sighed. “I still wish I’d done things differently.”

“Shit has already hit the fan, Vicky. The only thing you can do is move on.”

I cleared my throat, Ashley’s positiveness slowly seeping under my skin. “You’re right. Tomorrow I’ll head to the office and tell Pearson the truth.”

Ashley pulled me in for a hug. “Good. Whatever happens, happens. Everything will be fine, trust me.”

**

Even after Ashley’s pep talk, I couldn’t get Griffin off my mind. I desperately wanted to talk to him again – to see him, but that was impossible. Griffin wanted nothing to do with me and I couldn’t even blame him.

From his perspective, I understood his anger, his reaction to what I'd done and gosh, I hated myself for lying to him. Yet, I was a little ticked off that he didn't hear me out, at least. I made a mistake. Didn't all humans, at some point? I considered what Ashley said about me being in love with Griffin and while I hoped that wasn't the case, the rapid beating of my heart told me it was.

With a scoff, I piled up my pillows and dropped onto them. "Fuck love, and screw Griffin. I'm going to focus on myself; nothing else."

Griffin wasn't the only one with trust issues. I'd never seen love work out for anybody in my life. My mom was in love with my dad and he left before I was even born. Ashley fell head over heels for Damon and he cheated on her with his roommate's girl. Love was a lie. If love was what I felt for Griffin, I could do without it. It was probably the best thing for us, anyway.

I got dressed the following morning, blowing out a sigh as I stared at my reflection in the mirror. I wore a pair of dress pants that made me feel powerful, a cute buttoned top tucked in at the waist. I donned my hair in a ponytail to highlight my face, put on minimal makeup so I don't hide my natural beauty. My four-inch heels soon followed, then my short strap handbag completed the look. After doing a final twirl in the mirror I headed out, hoping for the best, but knowing it was probably wishful thinking.

"Hey, how did it go?" Colin asked as soon as I stepped from the elevator.

Confused, I frowned at him. "How did what go?"

"Your little adventure. Heard you were off chasing Griffin Holt."

I shook my head. No doubt Pearson had told the team about my pending story, which meant he planned to fire me if I didn't deliver. "Er– dead lead," I replied with a shrug.

"Oh, bummer." He tsked. "Pearson won't be pleased; you know that, right?"

I shrugged again, then headed to my cubicle to put my things down, mentally clearing my desk. Ashley was right. As much as I loved working at Grapevine Buzz, there were many other options to consider. With my record, I could find a new job in no time.

After confirming Pearson had arrived, I walked to his office, feeling lighter than I'd been in a long time.

His face lit up as soon as I entered. "Ah, Danvers. You're back. Please have a seat," he said with the most enthusiasm I'd ever heard

from him.

I managed a tight smile as I took a seat in front of him. He ran his gaze over me before clearing his throat. “So, how did it go with Griffin Holt?” he asked.

“Er– it was a dead end. He didn’t want to be interviewed and he made that clear.”

Pearson’s face fell. “What– so you got nothing?”

I nodded. “I’m sorry, sir.”

He scoffed. “Danvers, you ensured I’d get a story by the end of your time off.”

I licked my lips. “I thought so too, but I – he just wouldn’t budge.”

He raked his hand through his hair and clasped his hands at his mouth. “You begged for a chance, I gave you one and you blew it,” he gritted out.

“Mr. Pearson—”

“You know what this means, right?”

Although I’d been mentally prepared to leave, I didn’t want to do so without a fight. “Please, Mr. Pearson. This job means everything to me.”

“If it did, you would have made sure you got Holt’s story,” he replied. “Where is he? Maybe I can send a more skillful journalist to talk to him.”

I swallowed the lump in my throat. “I can’t tell you that.”

His eyes widened. “You can’t–” he choked out a dry laugh. “You’ve got to be kidding me.”

I remained silent, watching the emotions crossing Pearson’s face. He finally sighed before leaning back in his chair, his gaze trailing over me. “You can keep your job on one condition, Danvers.”

I perked up in my chair. “What’s that?”

He gestures between us. “A date, the two of us – my treat.”

I scoffed. “Are you serious?”

“Why wouldn’t I be?” he said, looking genuinely confused.

I stared at him, unable to believe what he just said. I never appreciated the way Pearson checked me out, but I never thought he would make a move on me. Asking me on a date as my boss was one

thing, but using it to manipulate me into keeping my job, now that was downright disgusting.

"The answer is no, Mr. Pearson," I replied. "I don't want to date you."

His face curled with a sneer. "Stop playing hard to get, Danvers. I've seen the way you look at me."

"Maybe you need to get those eyes checked, Sir," I returned stiffly, and his expression darkened.

"You're a little too feisty for someone whose job is hanging on the line. I could fire you right now, you know."

"You know what, don't even bother. I quit anyway," I said, shooting up from my chair, the force causing it to tip backward, almost falling over.

Without waiting for his response, I stormed to my cubicle, gathered my things from my desk and left the building, ignoring questions from my colleagues. Pearson was an asshole for firing me, but I didn't want to put the company in a negative light.

The strange thing was, when I got home, I didn't think about being unemployed or that my dream job was now gone. Griffin was my only thought, occupying my mind to a heart-wrenching degree. I couldn't stop reflecting on the time we shared, despite how short it was. I tried convincing myself that four days wasn't enough to fall in love, but the longer he stayed on my mind, more I ached for him, the harder it was to deny.

***

"I hope you're hungry," Ashley announced as she breezed through the front door. "Get ready for a feast." She dropped the bag on the center table and shrugged from her jacket.

"What's this?" I asked, curiously peering into the bag.

"Just a little reward for sticking it to Pearson. I stopped by that Caribbean restaurant across from the hospital. Their jerk chicken pasta is to die for—or so I've heard." She brushed me aside and unpacked the small bag. "I'll go get us some juice from the fridge. Coke?"

"Yeah sure," I called after her.

I opened the lid and was welcomed with the sweet, mouthwatering aroma that filled my nostrils, making me realize how hungry I was. I'd barely touched food for a few days now. A stomach bug had taken my appetite.

The pasta looked divine, but it reminded me of when Griffin cooked for us and how amazing it was. How wonderful the entire day had turned out. I couldn't help the tears that pricked my eyes from missing him so much. If only I'd been honest from the start. If only he'd forgive me.

Ashley returned, sitting beside me with a deep sigh. "You need to go see him."

I scoffed, shaking my head. "What I need is a job, Ash, not a man."

"You've sent out applications, right?"

"Yeah, but it's been two weeks—almost."

"I'm sure you'll be flooded with calls soon. Just be patient," she smiled, handing me my drink. "For now, enjoy your well-deserved break."

"I'm trying, Ash. Really."

Ashley pursed her lips, the way she usually did when she debated on saying something. "Why don't you use the break to go see Griffin?" she finally said. "The fight has been ripping you apart."

I cleared my throat. "I'm fine Ash." With my appetite fading, I twirled my fork in the food.

"You are far from fine. You're in love with Griffin and you don't want to admit it."

"What good will it do, anyway? Love is just for a time. There's never a happy ending; the story just ends at the good part."

She shook her head. "I don't believe that for a second. I'm not saying that love isn't complicated, but I'd take the risk if it meant being happy."

I sighed. "Griffin doesn't want anything to do with me, anyway. He's probably relieved that I'm gone. At least now he'll have his peace."

"Vicky–"

"Can we not talk about it ever again, please?"

Ashley pursed her lips, then released a conceding sigh. "Okay."

But her expression told she wasn't okay with letting it go.

***

Ashley respected my request for another week, but it didn't help with

my obsession with Griffin. I scoured the internet, hoping there was some news about him emerging from obscurity, but there was nothing on him. I figured he was still in Anchorage, shutting out the world – even more now after what I'd done.

By now he must have known I didn't break the story, but I guessed he still felt betrayed. I wanted to fix that. I needed to see him. I craved his touch, his lips. The longing for him inside me was almost unbearable sometimes. After three weeks, I was a far cry from being over him.

I curled into my blanket, wishing I could smell Griffin on it, but it was just me.

A wave of nausea covered me, prompting me sit up and reach for the cup of peppermint tea. The stomach flu had gotten worse. Ashley's over-the-counter suggestions did not help at all. She advised me about visiting the emergency room if the symptoms persisted, but I prayed they would clear up in a few days. The thought of sitting in a medicine-scented room for hours, listening to the sounds of sickness didn't sit well with me.

I drank all the tea then curled up in bed once more, again thinking of Griffin. I loved him. It wasn't a declaration I wanted to admit to anyone, at least, not yet, but in the privacy of my room, I felt comfortable confessing it. I had no idea if Griffin shared my feelings. A part of me wanted to find out. Despite how scary it was, I had to give it a shot.

I couldn't continue to torture myself. Maybe I should visit Griffin and apologize. What was the worst that could happen, him turning me away? He'd already done that, didn't he? There was no way his actions could hurt me any more than before.

Right?

No matter the outcome, I had to try. My conscience wouldn't let me up until I made that move.

Amid my thoughts, my phone rang, and I took it up, seeing Jimmy's name on the screen. I wasn't in the mood for a conversation, but Jimmy had been good to me.

"Hey, you. What's up?" I answered.

"Hey, beautiful. I haven't heard from you in a while—not that I'm not used to it," he joked. "But I thought you'd get back to me about that lead I gave you."

"I'm sorry, Jimmy. There's been a lot going on."

“Well, I haven’t seen your story in print, so I’m figuring it’s something else, right?”

I scratched my head. “Kind of and not really, but the story was a bust and I lost my job,” I informed him.

“Ah dang, sorry to hear about that Vic,” he said, the genuineness clear in his voice.

“Thanks, Jimmy, but I’ll be fine. You know me; I always bounce back.”

“So… to the reason I really called,” he began, and I pushed to a sitting position. I’d never heard him sound so doubtful before.

“I’m listening,” I replied.

“About that dinner we talked about; are you still up for it?” he asked.

I fiddled with the edge of the blanket, pondering. It had been a minute since I last went out. A date with my good friend was probably what I needed to get out of this funk. “Sounds great. When?” I asked.

“How about seven tomorrow? There’s an Italian restaurant in the new strip mall I’d want us to try.”

“Ok, sounds good. I’ll see you then.” I ended the call and bit my lips, guilt digging at my insides. Why did it feel wrong to say yes to Jimmy? Griffin and I weren’t together – we were far from it – which meant I could see whomever I wanted.

But as I placed the phone on the night table, the image of Griffin with another woman flashed through my head. White-hot jealously filled me. The thought of Griffin moving on cut me deep. I didn’t want him with someone else. I wanted him to be mine, which means I had some serious groveling to do.

Chapter 15

Griffin

Watching Victoria leave was the hardest thing I ever experienced in my life. Not even when I discovered Rachel's treachery did it hurt like this. I'd watched through my window as she had climbed into that truck and for every day after that, I'd thought about it, the memory like a plague. Deep down, I knew I hadn't done the right thing, but I couldn't accept that — not when I felt so much pain because of what she had done.

Blinded by anger, I'd acted brashly, cursing myself for being so stupid. I should have seen through her façade, but like a fool, I'd allowed her beauty—and her body— to get to me. To think I would have learned from what Rachel did to me. In my heart, I knew Victoria was nothing like my ex-wife, but her betrayal hurt me. She'd worked her way into my life under false pretenses and had gotten what she came for. How could I even forgive that?

With her gone, the days felt longer and more meaningless. I wanted her by my side again, but I was too stubborn to admit it. As the weeks passed, I realized there was no story about me — I'd checked every article online and to my surprise, there was nothing. Victoria didn't print the story. At least she'd been honest about that.

I considered everything else she'd said. Did she sleep with me because she had feelings for me, or was it a strategy to make me open up? People got more vulnerable after sex, didn't they? Did she think I was that guy?

Turned out I was. Like an idiot, spilled my life story because she opened her legs.

I shook my head at my reflection in the mirror, raking my fingers through my hair that had grown longer over the weeks – my bushy beard brushing my chest. I looked terrible. Heartbreak had done a number on me.

Although Victoria had trampled on my heart, it still beat for her. Still fucking ached for her. Despite what she'd done, there was no denying I was in love with her. It was crazy to admit, but I fell in love with her from the day she stormed out of the house and almost froze in the snowstorm. There was little I knew about her – little I knew to be true, but I had to feel this way for some reason. Surely she was the woman for me.

Right?

I reached for the scissors, trimmed a few layers off my beard before I used the shear, and cut it low– the lowest it had ever been in a while. After washing my hair and styling it in a ponytail, I booked a flight to Los Angeles. I'd vowed never to return to the city, but I was willing to break the vow for her. I wanted the truth. Did she feel anything for me?

My phone rang as I finished and I rushed to it, hoping by some miracle Victoria had gotten my number. I pursed my lips when I saw Kourtney's image on the screen. I pressed the answer button, placing the phone to my ear.

"Hey sis," I answered.

"Hey yourself. How are you?"

"I'm fine, just packing my things for the next flight out," I replied.

"The next flight out to where?" she asked, her voice filled with hope.

"LA," I said simply.

"You're coming to LA? Seriously?"

I couldn't help my smile. "Correct."

She choked a laugh. "Are you the same Griffin who vowed never to set foot in LA again? What changed?"

I shrugged. "I've been here long enough; I need to feel the sun on my skin again."

"Mhmm. I doubt that's the reason, but I'll take it. I've missed you so much."

Kourtney knew me too well, but I wasn't ready to tell her about Victoria, especially with all the complications involved. "I've missed you too."

She giggled. "You sound happy."

I sighed. "Not quite, but I'll get there. Hopefully soon."

"Oh, you will. Just one step at a time."

There was a short pause, then she continued. "So grandma called this morning. Wanted to know if I had a baby on the way."

"Typical Grandma," I replied with a snort. "Always with those baby questions. Isn't ten great-grandkids enough?

"Obviously not. It's different this time, though. She dreamt about catching fish last night."

I smirked, remembering the superstition. If there was a dream about fish, it meant there was a baby on the way. "So, is she right?"

Kourtney scoffed. "Right my ass, you know I'm into girls."

"Occasionally," I put in and she laughed heartily. I hadn't heard Kourtney laugh like that in such a long time and I realized it was because she always worried about me.

"But you know her dreams are always on point."

"Yeah, usually," I replied, pulling an overnight bag from the closet.

"So… I was thinking maybe it was meant for you instead."

I snorted right away. "Yeah, right."

"Oh, come on, Griff. You're my brother, but even I can admit you're a good-looking guy. I'm sure the ladies in Anchorage—"

"Kourtney, those dreams mean nothing, and they certainly aren't meant for me," I cut in, though despite my words, I couldn't help wondering it was true. Victoria and I didn't use protection—in hindsight, not the best decision—but that made it possible, right?

Kourtney giggled. "I'm just saying; it's more likely for you than me."

Rubbing the nape of my neck, I sighed. "I hear you loud and clear. Well, if there's an off chance that you'll become an aunt, you'll be the first to know."

"Oh I already know," she teased.

I rolled my eyes, though she couldn't see me. "If you say so. Listen, pick me up at five, tomorrow, okay? I've got some work to do."

That work involved packing the bag for my flight. It was a risk going to see Victoria, but one I had to take. Plus, Kourtney was right. Our grandmother's dreams were always true. Funny how she never dreamt of any fish when Rachel got pregnant.

Chapter 16

Griffin

The following day, I disembarked the flight at LAX, welcoming the weather that was a balmy contrast compared to Anchorage. It was around this exact time seven years ago when I left, vowing never to look back. Funny how my life had come full circle. The reason I came back wasn't a hilarious one, though.

Pulling in a breath, I exited the terminal, my eyes scanning the sea of people. Everyone wore bright smiles, their bodies bouncing with anticipation as they waited for their loved ones. The squeals were deafening, the smiles contagious as people reunited.

"Griff!" I heard a voice, my head snapping in the direction where I saw Kourtney's smile mimicking that of those around me. She wore a bright grin on her face as she rocked from side to side. I could tell she was just dying to hug me. I dropped my bags to the floor and opened my arms to her, watching as she ran to me, her head crashing against my chest as she hugged me tight. I chuckled and wrapped my arms around her, her body almost lost in the midst.

"Gosh, it's good to have you back," she croaked, followed by a sniffle.

I clenched my teeth, the emotions bubbling up inside me. "I missed you, Kourt."

"Not as much as I missed you," she said, easing from me and staring me up and down, her eyes pooling with tears. "You've gotten so… huge." She laughed and I joined in.

We spent the entire ride to her house trying to catch up—well, it was more talking on Kourtney's end. We stopped for gas, and as we pulled off the pump, she put the car in park and turned to me, a cheeky smile on her face.

"Okay. I'm done trying to be patient. Who is she?"

"Huh?" I said, surprised by her question.

She snorted. "Griff, don't act dumb. I know you love me, but you didn't return to LA for me."

I blew a sigh. "Fine. I came for Victoria, the journalist you gave my address."

Kourtney pumped the air with her fist. "I knew it! When you

hung up after asking me about her, I figured that wasn't random. Does she know you're here?"

I shook my head. "We had a fight. A huge one. She lied about the reason she came to Anchorage."

"Oh, bummer," Kourtney said, staring at me with pity.

"I don't even know if I'm doing the right thing coming here. Can I look past that lie?"

"Nobody's perfect, Griff, and life's too short to not forgive, not to take risks… not to love."

"You saw where love got me the last time," I reminded her.

"Nothing's wrong with picking yourself up and trying again."

I sighed and leaned back in my seat, considering what she said.

"Do you even know where she is?"

I nodded. "I made a few calls while I waited for the flight. Remember Thomas, the PI who had a crush on you? He found her address."

She smiled. "Then what are you waiting for?"

"A shower and some sleep," I replied.

She rolled her eyes at me, changing gears. "Tomorrow isn't promised, Griff. I say you get there now and tell her how you feel."

My brows furrowed. "Where is all of this coming from, Kourt?"

"From you, Griff. From that sparkle in your eyes. I haven't seen you so…" she paused, slowing down to give another car passage. "So excited in a while."

I shook my head and gave her the address, trying to relax as she made the half hour drive to Victoria's apartment. I wouldn't admit it out loud, but she was right. Well, half right. This was more than excitement. Desperation was probably a better description of how I felt. The sooner I saw Victoria again, the quicker we could hash out our issues and be together again. I couldn't want to hold her in my arms.

Kourtney pulled into the driveway of Victoria's apartment building and parked the car. "Good luck, brother. Although, I doubt you'll need it. This mountain man vibe makes you dreamy. Like a meal; isn't that what the kids are saying these days?"

I reached for the handle, grinning. "I have no idea what the slangs mean these days."

The smile slowly faded when I saw Victoria coming down the steps. She wore her hair loose and she had a little makeup on – her skin glowing despite the cool air. A stylish coat covered her body, but I glimpsed a black dress underneath, one that hugged her tight and sat above her knees. I couldn't take my eyes off her. How beautiful she was and how much I'd missed her. All the emotions came back, overwhelming me. If I was ever unsure of my feelings for her, that moment made them very clear.

"That's her alright," Kourtney whispered, and I almost jumped out my seat, forgetting she was beside me.

As my hands moved to pull the handle, I paused, my teeth clenching tight when a tall, brown-skin man stepped out of a car and approached her. He smiled at her, and the blood draining from my face when he kissed her cheeks. I gripped the handle when they hugged. From where I sat, I could see the blush on Victoria's face.

My body heated with anger, the air in the car hot as a series of emotions passed through me. My chest rose and fell, and I swore I saw red as I tore my gaze away and grounded my teeth so hard, I thought they'd shatter in my mouth.

I snarled, pulling the car handle when I heard a click. I flashed my head towards Kourtney who swallowed visibly, concern on her face.

"Open the door, Kourt," I bit out.

"Griff, I need you to calm down before you do something stupid," she said.

"Open the damned door!" I growled and she flinched a bit.

She shook her head. "Not when you're this angry."

I huffed, watching as the guy opened the car door and guided Victoria inside. I wanted to wipe the stupid smile off his face with my fist. I dropped my head against the seat as his engine revved to life and the car sped off, disappearing within seconds.

I slammed my hands against the dashboard, muttering a curse before I glanced at Kourtney. "Take me back to the airport," I mumbled.

"What?"

"Coming here was a mistake. It was stupid of me to believe this would lead to anything good."

"Come on Griff. She's probably having dinner with a friend. Give her a chance to explain."

“No. She’s clearly moved on. Heck, for all I know, she’s been with him all this time!”

“Or, he might be a friend like I said—”

“Take me back to the airport, Kourtney,” I cut in.

“Griff—”

“Take me back, or I’ll call a cab.”

With a sigh, Kourtney spun the car around and returned in the direction we came in. The drive was mostly silent until we got to the airport. She parked and bit her lips as she glanced at me.

“I just think you’re making a huge mistake,” she said softly.

“The mistake was in coming here,” I replied, shoving the door open. “I’ll call you when I get back home.”

I heard her sniffs as I left the car, but I was too angry to look back. Too angry at myself. Besides, I didn’t want to linger in LA any longer that I needed to. I entered the huge building, checking for an available flight. It turned out I had to wait a few hours, but it gave me enough time to reflect on how stupid I’d been for coming here. Victoria’s lies were red flags I’d ignored because I assumed she was different, but she was just like my ex. A liar. As I sat in the departure lounge wrapped in anger and sorrow, I swore that when I locked out the world this time, it would be for good.

Chapter 17

Victoria

That date with Jimmy only confirmed what I already knew deep inside, that the only man I wanted in my life – the only man I wanted to get dolled up for, the only man I wanted to open my door and slip his hand around the small of my back, the only man I wanted to take me to an amazing dinner, was Griffin. For the first time since we met in college, I struggled to engage with Jimmy. Griffin occupied every inch of my thoughts.

Sure enough, Jimmy made the night fun, complimenting me on my outfit, entertaining me with stories about this job, prompting me to order the most expensive items on the menu, but he would never be the man for me. Not when Griffin was out there. When I returned home from dinner that night, I was even more desperate to see him – more tempted to book a flight to Anchorage just to be with him.

Christmas was a day away. I'd never spent the holiday without Ashley since my mom died a few years ago, but I had to do this. Time was against me—at least, that was how I felt. The sooner I booked that flight, the better. I didn't want to be apart from the man I loved during my favorite time of year, so I packed my bags, Ashley cheering me on as I prepared myself to do the wildest thing ever.

"Gosh, this feels like those Hallmark movies we usually watched on Christmas Eve," she said with a squealed. I shook my head at her enthusiasm, my nerves getting a hold of me.

"I'm doing the right thing, right?" I asked, pausing with a sweater in my hand.

"Of course you are, sweetie! Come here!" she said, opening her arms for a hug.

I grinned, moving to her. A sudden bout of dizziness made me sway, and I sat down instead.

"Are you okay?" Ashley asked, her voice laced with concern.

I rubbed my forehead. "Yeah, just a little dizzy, I guess. It's fine – it rarely lasts," I reassured with a smile.

Ashley's forehead wrinkled. "Still? I thought you were getting better."

I shrugged. "It's been on and off for a few days now, but I just

figured I needed to rest."

"Hmm." Ashley came up to me, pressing the back of her hand to my forehead and examining my skin. "Your face looks a little yellow. Your blood count might be a bit low." She stood there puzzled, as if trying to solve a math problem. "When's the last time you had your period?" she asked, and I froze.

"What?"

"Your period; last time?" she hastened, flicking her fingers at me.

I swallowed hard. "Er, last month?" I guessed.

"What date last month?"

I reached for my phone, opening the period app I used to track my cycle. "Oh. It's three weeks late," I announced, glancing up at her.

"Well, that's no cause for alarm. Your periods have always been irregular. You used protection with Griffin, right?"

My stomach dropped, and my hands instantly became sweaty. "I…huh, Ash…" my hands shook.

Ashley's mouth flew open. She gaped at me before slapping the side of her head then dashing out the room. I sat there, staring in the spot she'd occupied until she returned, handing me a small box. I took it and read the label, realizing it was a pregnancy test.

I gasped, a lump forming in my throat as I imagined the prospect of carrying Griffin's child. "I'm not pregnant," I whispered, my voice too weak. "I can't be."

"One way to find out, Vicky," Ashley replied, her expression as somber as I felt.

I swallowed the huge lump in my throat and blinked back the blurriness from my eyes as I moved to the bathroom, Ashley right behind me, standing at the door.

I peed on the stick and pulled my pants up, waiting desperately for the results. Ashely chewed on her nails, clearly nervous, but I was feeling so many emotions, it was hard to pinpoint one. My hand shook as I lifted the stick peered at the blankness. Nothing had appeared yet, but it felt like I'd been waiting forever.

"Damn it, why is this taking so long?" Ashley muttered.

I ushered her out the bathroom because she made me extra nervous, then I sat on the floor, waiting for the beep on the timer. When it sounded, I got up, unable to control my shaking hands and

the sweat that washed me as the results popped up on screen.

Pregnant.

A single tear fell on the stick, blurring the results on the small screen. The door opened and Ashley stepped in. I broke out in tears and she reached for me.

"What am I going to do, Ash?" I sobbed. "What if Griffin wants nothing to do with a baby? Or me?"

"Listen, Vicky. Griffin or no Griffin, you'll be a great mom plus, you have me."

That made me smile, but I still felt like shitting my pants. Ashley was right; I'd be a great parent, but I still wanted Griffin to be a part of our lives. As I calmed myself and considered how good this could be, I couldn't help the happiness that fluttered in my stomach.

"I have a feeling he'll welcome the news. Don't tell me how I know. I just do." Ashley wipe my face. "This is an even greater sign that you need to go see him."

Her response made me anxious, yet excited, ready to surprise Griffin with the ultimate Christmas gift.

Chapter 18

Griffin

Twenty-four hours had already passed since I returned home, and I was still moping – wallowing in self-pity and hating myself for not even hating Victoria like I should. It was Christmas Eve, and I was the most pathetic man in the world—in the top five, at least, pining over a woman who was having the time of her life with another man. I was just the guy she fucked as a means to an end – the guy she fucked up even more than he was. I meant nothing to her. It angered and hurt me to the very core.

In an attempt to get out of my funk, I made coffee, intending to write. There was nothing like pouring myself on a few blank pages, the perfect purge. Yes, exactly what I needed.

As I poured the coffee in my cup, I heard a knock on the front door. I frowned, wondering if Alan had taken my dinner invite seriously. I wasn't in the mood for company. Not tonight.

I walked to the door and pulled it open, my heart racing in my chest when I saw Victoria standing there, two bags at her feet. A thick coat covered her body, her loose hair framing her face. Fuck, I'd never seen her more beautiful. I'd never been more in love until that moment.

She swallowed hard, her cheeks reddening as her eyes ran over my face. "H– hi."

My heart danced from seeing her again, but I refused to let it show. "What are you doing here?" I asked, the image of her and that guy flashing through my head.

"Can I come in?"

I hesitated, my hand curling around the edge of the door. Her long eyelashes fluttered as she waited, the hope on her face melting my heart. I stepped aside, allowing her to pass. Her familiar scent filled me with longing, tempting me to pull her close and breathe her in. I kept my hands to myself as we made our way to the living room.

Victoria turned to me, clasping her hands together. She seemed cold, and I wanted nothing more than to warm her up. But as I stared at her, I could still see her in that man's arms – the pleasant smile on her face. My jaw tightened from the memory. I rolled my fingers into fists as anger bubbled up inside me.

“How have you been?” she asked softly.

I shrugged. “I’ve been better. You?”

“Totally miserable. I missed you.”

I scoffed, pushing my hands in the pocket of my pants.

“I’m serious, Griffin,” she replied, a plea on her face. “I know I hurt you and I’m so very sorry. I didn’t mean to, but I was so desperate when I got here. It was either your story or lose my job. But when we got together, none of it mattered. I only wanted you.”

She reached for me, but I stepped back. “I should’ve told you who I was the second I woke up. I’m still kicking myself for not doing that. Please believe me, Griffin. I didn’t mean to hurt you.”

I continued to stare at her, my frown still in place. She glanced up at me and visibly swallowed before rubbing her hands together and clearing her throat. “If it’s any consolation, I didn’t print the story. I couldn’t.”

I scoffed again. What was she expecting, a reward?

She bit her lips after getting nothing but a cold stare from me. “I also quit my job.”

“Why?” I was curious to know.

She looked up at me again, her expression brightening at the single word from my lips. “My boss told me I could keep my job if we dated, so I quit,” she said, rolling her eyes.

I breathed a harsh sigh, unable to believe she was lying right in front of my face… again. “Just leave, Victoria,” I grumbled.

Her eyes widened and she looked confused. “What?”

I blew out another breath to calm myself. “You’re standing here lying to my face again!” I roared, and tears settled in her eyes.

“What else did I lie about, Griffin?”

I raked my fingers through my hair, suppressing the anger. “I went to LA, Victoria. Like a fool, I felt guilty for the way I treated you when you left and I believed we stood a chance,” I informed her, shaking my head.

“You visited LA?” It was almost a whisper. “Why didn’t you try to find me?” Hurt filled her face, the words fragile and broken.

“I did find you,” I replied through gritted teeth. “I was right in the parking lot of your apartment building when I saw you coming down the steps, dressed up, a smile on your face. I watched as some

other man pulled you in his arms… kissed you."

Her face paled and she palmed her throat. "Jimmy kissed me on the cheek, not my mouth."

For some reason, her defense angered me even more. "Does that make it okay?"

"It meant nothing, Griffin."

"Don't lie to me, Victoria," I snarled. "I'm sick of it. The way he looked at you, that wasn't nothing—"

"Can you just listen to me?" she shouted, her big brown eyes glistening.

I paused, staring at her, surprised by the outburst. "That man you saw was my friend. He wasn't my boss. Jimmy and I knew each other since college. I owed him dinner for his help with finding you. That was all it was."

I processed the words. "And you expect me to believe you?"

"Yes," she said firmly. "It's the truth, Griffin."

A long beat passed as I battled with the urge to believe her and the insecurities that plagued me. I wanted to believe she wouldn't hurt me again, but did I want to take that chance?

"I've need you, Griffin," she breathed, and my gaze shot up to hers, my heart soaring. How could I even hold back after hearing that?

"I'll never lie to you again, I promise." She moved closer, smiling when I didn't back away this time. "I love you so much."

Hell. I swallowed the lump in my throat as the walls crumbled around me. Hearing the words were all it took for me to concede. I had no doubt she was telling the truth. Not when her eyes didn't leave mine as she spoke – not when I could feel the genuineness radiating from her.

"I missed you too," I confessed. "And I'm sorry for how I treated you the day you left. Despite what happened, you didn't deserve that. Forgive me?"

She smiled, her eyes glistening. "Already done."

I approached her and she met me halfway. A gentle sigh left her lips as I brushed the hair from her face. "I missed your touch," she whispered.

"That's putting it mildly, at least for me," I replied. "I've never ached for anyone this much."

She gasped. “Oh, Griffin. You have no idea how happy you just made me.”

I couldn’t help my grin. “Well, you can show me how much…”

Victoria chuckled, giving me a gentle nudge in my side. I tackled her to the floor, and she laughed out loud, the sound like music to my ears. I wrapped my arms around her, breathing her sweet scent like I wanted to when she got here. She pulled back, staring at my face with the love that ran through me, too.

“Do over?” she said, and I nodded.

“Do over.”

I helped her off the floor, her smile fading as she straightened. As I released her, she swayed, then grabbed onto the sofa to steady herself. Her ashen face left me concerned.

“Are you okay?” I asked, searching her face.

She nodded, sitting gingerly on the couch. “There’s something I need to tell you, Griffin.”

“Okay…” I sat beside her, taking her hand. “Whatever it is, I can handle it, okay?”

“Okay.” She placed her hand over mine, breathing deeply. “I didn’t just come for your forgiveness. We’re having a baby.”

My eyes widened, my heart rate running a mile a second I processed her words.

“Look, I understand if you need some time to process this. It’s not like we planned it—”

I laughed, my vision blurring with tears. Kourtney was right! My grandmother was right!

Victoria gasped when I swept her in my arms, kissing her briefly before I hugged her tight and basked in the feeling of having her here with me again, with the most beautiful gift.

“You have no idea how happy you’ve made me, and I’m sorry it took our fight to realize, but I love you Victoria.”

I clamped my mouth to hers, replenishing myself with what I’d missed so much these past weeks. Victoria was back in my arms and I was the luckiest man alive. She was my soulmate and I could feel that in her touch – how she fitted against me perfectly. I wanted her so much – had craved for her like I’ve never craved for anything and now, after what seemed like a lifetime later, I finally had her again.

I lifted her into my arms and carried her to my bedroom where

I gently placed her small body on the bed, watching as she peeled off her clothes while I removed mine. My gaze went to her still-flat stomach and happiness washed through me as I envisioned her with my baby in her arms. She would be the perfect mother, I just knew it.

Victoria caught me staring and she stroked her stomach with a smile. “Are you truly happy about it?” she asked timidly.

“Happier than a man could ever be,” I replied with a smile.

She grinned, pushing up on her knees and reaching for me, the longing obvious in her eyes. Her warm body pressed to mine. My cock hardened as she rolled against me. I kissed every inch of her body – lingering at her stomach, love rushing through me when I thought of the baby inside. My lips moved down to the flesh between her thighs. Victoria gasped, her body inching up when I lashed her with my tongue.

“God, I missed this,” she moaned, her body writhing as I delivered hard licks to her clit. Her orgasm came swiftly, and from the violent way she gripped my hair, it was fucking intense.

Before she recovered, I eased up, settling between her thighs. She wrapped her legs around my waist and pinned her arms around my neck, trapping me in place, her warm body the perfect fit beneath mine. My breath paused as I sunk my cock inside her, emotions running from head to toe. A sweet moan left her lips as she gripped me tighter.

“Oh fuck, Victoria. You feel so fucking good around me,” I whispered in her ear, my dick gliding through her warm flesh.

“You feel fucking good inside me, too,” she said between moans, raising her hips to meet my thrusts. I went all the way, Victoria’s legs pinning me in place as I explored her. It felt like heaven, her soft skin like velvet. I couldn’t go another day without this woman by my side.

Her pussy pulsed around me, and I picked up the pace, knowing she was close.

“Oh yes! Harder, Griffin. Harder!” she begged, and I obliged, feeling her legs tightening around me.

I fucked her hard and deep, maintaining eye contact as I filled her with each thrust. Her small mouth fell open, a series of emotions played across her face while her pussy convulsed around me, trying to milk me dry.

“Yes, that’s it, Victoria. Come for me,” I ordered.

She exploded with a scream, her pussy holding me in a tight grip. Just like that, I came apart, filling her with deep long strokes until I emptied myself inside her.

Spent, I half rolled off her, careful not to crush her with my weight. “Merry Christmas, beautiful,” I whispered. For the first time in seven years, I looked forward to the holiday, thrilled to share it with someone I loved.

Victoria smiled and wrapped her legs around me again, as if making sure I didn’t go anywhere. “Merry Christmas, my mountain man,” she whispered, arousal still on her face. She reached down and stroked me, and it took nothing for me to get hard again, ready for her. I groaned, already drunk from pleasure as she straddled me, sinking down on my cock.

Holy hell. This woman would be the death of me.

Epilogue

Victoria

6 months later

I breathed a sigh as I glanced at my watch and looked around the large studio. “Have you seen him?” I asked a crew member.

“No ma’am,” she said with a tight smile before she walked away.

I headed to my office and took a seat, closing my eyes, happy to be off my feet. I glanced at my phone on the table and just as I was about to pick it up, my eyes caught the picture frame on my desk. It was my first day at the popular news studio and I had the biggest smile on my face. I remembered it like it was just yesterday.

Griffin and I had just disembarked the plane from Anchorage, and we were waiting for a cab ride to my apartment when my phone rang. Figuring it was Ashley telling me she’d gotten off work early, I dug through my bag and pulled it out. The unknown number on the screen made me hesitate. Usually I’d let it go to voicemail, but since I’d sent out my job applications a week ago, I’d hope this was the job offer I’d been waiting for.

“Hello,” I answered.

“Hi, is this Victoria Danvers?” the female voice had asked.

“Yes this is she.”

“I’m Jessica Hughes, calling from Premiere Communications. Ms Danvers, we’ve reviewed your application and did some research of our own. We’d like to schedule an interview with you…”

The joy that instantly bubbled in my chest was like no other. I hopped on my toes with a squeal, finding it hard to believe that it was true. Griffin raised a questioning brow at me, and I gave him a thumb-up sign, which meant nothing to him at the moment, but I would explain soon enough. Premiere was an even bigger news company than my previous job and I had only applied on a whim, doubting they would even call me.

I’d felt so lucky. Life was finally looking up. Griffin had decided to move back to LA. I’d landed the job of a lifetime. We had a precious baby on the way. There was nothing more I wanted. I was completely satisfied.

Little did I know, life still had a special reward for me.

The interview went so well that Jessica asked if I wanted my own show, which was beyond anything I could ever imagine. They wanted someone authentic and fresh and apparently, I fitted the bill. Saying yes took no effort. Now I was five months in, with my own producer, hairstylist, executive assistant… I even had a personal driver. Life couldn't get any better if it tried.

I smiled at the memory of my first day on the job and reached for my phone, dialing Griffin's number.

"Where are you?" I asked as the line opened.

"Right here," he replied. Hearing an echo, I spun in my chair to find him at my door, wearing a bright smile as he peeked around the edge.

A matching smile smeared my face as I got up from my desk and lurched towards him. He caught me and chuckled, placing a soft kiss on my lips.

"I thought you forgot."

He made a face. "I wouldn't miss this for the world."

I grinned and kissed him again. "I was starting to get worried."

He sighed. "I must admit, I'm a little nervous."

My fingers traced his low cut beard. "You'll be fine."

His gaze lowered to my stomach and he knelt on his knees to caress the round mound. "How's my little pea, doing?" he asked, large hands roaming the perimeter of my stomach.

I looked down, beaming as I watched him. "He was a little kicker today, but I think he's calmed down."

A flutter suddenly appeared in my stomach, causing Griffin's eyes to widen. "Guess someone's excited to see me."

I grinned. "We both are."

He kissed my stomach and then he rose to do the same thing to me. "You've given me the best gift ever; I don't know how I'll ever repay you."

"Oh, babe. Your love is always enough, you know that."

"Is it?" A wolfish grin appeared on his face as he gripped my ass. "If it's not, I could always make it up to you."

His hard pressed against my belly, letting me know exactly how he wanted to make it up to me. "Behave. We're about to go live."

He breathed a sigh, kissing me tenderly on the lips. Desire swept through my entire body as I kissed him back with just as much fervor.

A knock came at the door and we broke apart, both our gazes turned towards the door. “Mrs Holt, they’re ready for you,” the slender girl announced.

“Ok thanks Mandy, I’ll be there in a sec.” She nodded and then she disappeared around a corner.

I looked at Griffin who had a smirk on his face. “Mrs Holt. I like the sound of that.”

“Of course you do,” I said and he chuckled. “Let’s go.”

I went on set with Griffin by my side, my eyes trained on the space they’d decorated for me. The sofa neatly laid out, the contrasting colors, beautiful lighting. Everything was brilliant and lively and just how I liked it.

“Ok, Vic, we start in five,” the crew manager announced, a makeup artist immediately stepping forward to retouch my makeup.

“Ok I’m all set.” I glanced at Griffin who blinked as the makeup artist applied a little powered to his T-zone. “Babe?”

“I’m ready,” he murmured.

We both moved towards the small set. I took a seat and glanced at the stack of books on the small coffee table in front. It was Griffin’s newest title—another bestselling title – a romance inspired by our love. Pride bubbled in my chest as I glanced at him. He was neatly clad in a black suit with a blue tie that matched my dress.

Ashley came up behind him, waving at me with a huge smile on her face. I waved back, resting my hand against my stomach as I reflected on how lucky I was. I had everything I’ve ever wanted and more.

“Ok Vic, in three, two…” The producer gave a signal and I turned to the huge camera positioned in front of me.

“Good day America and welcome to Victoria’s corner. Today I have a very special guest with me. Author of Save Me and a few other bestsellers, it’s my pleasure to welcome Griffin Holt for the long awaited interview.”

The small audience erupted in a series of cheers while I sat there smiling, watching as my man walked towards me, a smile on his face. I stood and accepted the small kiss he offered before he took a seat on a nearby single sofa.

Our gazes met. Bubbles of happiness filled my chest. I had no regrets going up that mountain in that snowstorm. I didn't regret falling for him. Griffin was my forever as I was his. I never believed in love, but with him, anything was possible.

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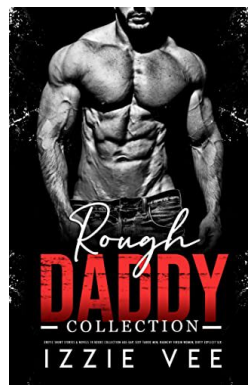

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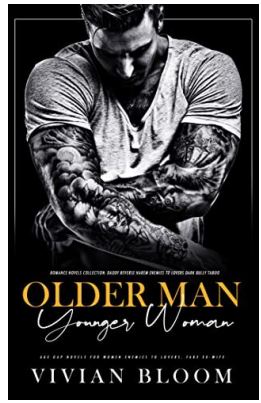

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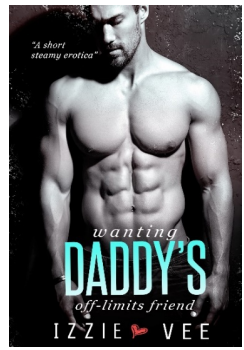

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SAMPLE

I couldn't believe that I was about to head off to college and never had a sexual experience in my life. The person I considered my boyfriend in my senior years of high school was initially the person I thought I would take the big step with but later found that he only had one intention in mind, and that was to fuck the only girl in our year who was rumored to still be a virgin – me. It had hurt, and I had broken off the relationship with a few heated words thrown at him but later realized there wasn't much I wanted out of the relationship either rather than sex.

I didn't want to be a virgin anymore, so I picked the boy that had given me the most attention and decided that he was the one. Unfortunately, he wasn't and here I was, about to head off to college with my hymen intact.

If it were only based on desire alone, then my dream guy would be the one who came over to my house every now and then with all his charm and kindness. He was the first crush I ever had, but I knew there was nothing I could make of the relationship considering he was my father's best friend.

Connor was everything I wanted in a man; he was sweet, kind, caring, incredibly handsome, and packing for his age. He taught gym at the college that I was accepted into, which made my excitement all the more profound. Dad said that Connor would be there to look out for me as he had always done, and I … ***To continue reading get your FREE DOWNLOAD HERE.***